

# SURREAL GROTESQUE

Issue 12

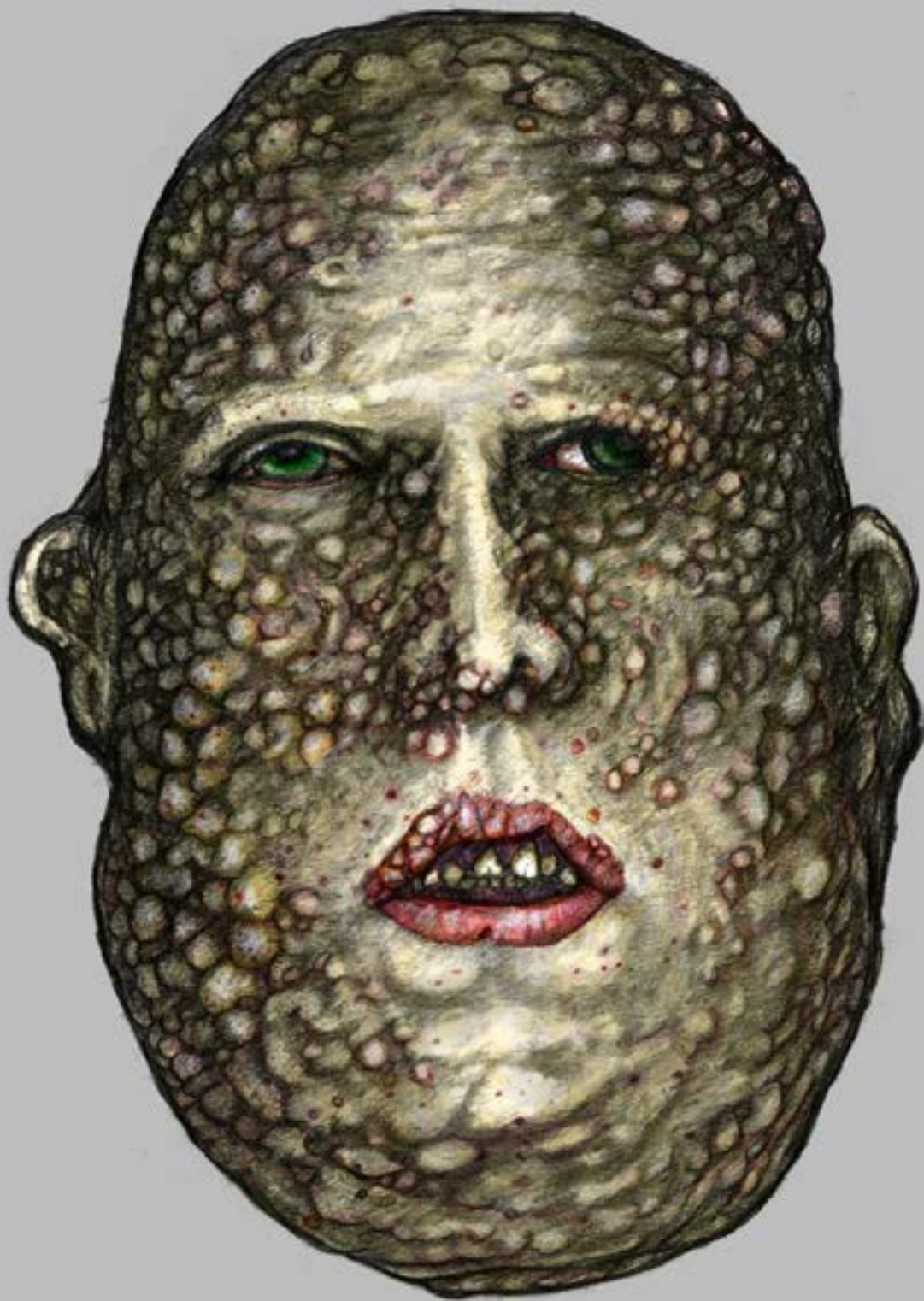


# BIZARRO

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# Becoming Joseph Wargo

Nic wants to become a robot, so he eats metal. He works in the electronics department of WORLDCO, a major retail store that claims to sell everything. He loves his job because it's simple work, decent pay, and gives him an unlimited access to metal.

Every morning before work, Nic eats AAA batteries for breakfast. It takes him twenty minutes to walk through the store from his room in the Employee Domicile aisle to Electronics. He always makes sure to leave thirty minutes early. The extra time is spent scoping out the hardware section. He likes to swipe a handful of washers, snack wafers to munch on until lunch.

Nic went to the Medical Doctor aisle last week and the prognosis wasn't good.

While amputating another finger, the doctor told him, "You wanna lose the rest of these? Quit eating that shit or it could be your arm next."

"That doctor is a jealous quack," Nic tells himself as he arrives for work this morning. "It's only a matter of time before new metal fingers form to replace my weak flesh. I can make due with just my left thumb and right middle for now. Two fingers is plenty to work a cash register."

He holds his hands up and inspects them. He bites the left one. It hurts. Pain is stupid. Someday he won't feel pain anymore. All he will feel is cold metal. Trying to imagine this feeling fills him with strength and he smiles.

Today is an exciting day for Nic. There is a new department opening in his store. Construction workers have been busy getting it set up behind temporary, ceiling-to-floor walls. The only entrance is guarded by a couple WORLDCO Type 4R Security Drones.

The new department is going to be called "Extrasolar Aeronautics" to sound fancy, but everyone knows they're going to start selling the first consumer level faster-than-light spaceships. These ships will be built

with special computer AI chips more technologically advanced than anything else available on the market.

This is Nic's plan: Tonight, the construction workers will leave for the day and WORLDCO's night shift will begin lazily shuffling in. He will clock out like normal, but instead of heading back to the Employee Domicile aisle he'll head straight for the Employee Restrooms out behind the store building.

Waiting for him there will be Gordy, one of the night custodians. In exchange for borrowing his uniform, Gordy will be presented with a small collection of stolen child anime title from Nic's department. Nic will return to the store in disguise, and Gordy will have the night off to touch himself repeatedly to jello-eyed, chibi nonsense.

An EMP device, also conveniently sold in Electronics, will be used against the Security Drones and then Nic can feast. Once he's eaten enough high tech parts, he assumes his transformation will accelerate exponentially, giving him the strength and power necessary to destroy the store. Maybe he'll run off with that cute, bald-headed prostitute working in the Red Light aisle, too. Nic has a thing for smooth surfaces.

That was Nic's plan. Everything goes beautifully right up until he gets past the Drones. Inside the half constructed department, he finds tools, a forklift and a pile of scrap metal, but no merchandise. He's too early.

Nic is about to head back to his domicile when he notices a small, unopened package shoved into a corner. The label reads "Display/Demo Unit". He pulls out his box cutter and tears into it. He doesn't care if they're navigational joysticks or comm mics, he's so hungry he'd eat rust right now.

The control panel looks unlike any other piece of electronics Nic has ever seen, loaded with switches, buttons, connector ports, LEDs and LCDs. It's a jumble of functionality, and it's all powered by a



computer chip inside the panel.

He rushes over to a worker's tool box, pulls out a screwdriver, and opens the panel. As carefully as his shaking hands allow, he pries the processing chip off the motherboard and pops it into his mouth, swallowing it whole.

Nic closes his eyes and watches the process, as he imagines it, going on inside his body. The chip gropes around in his stomach with its leadframe legs, looking for a contact point. It connects with a nerve ending and begins uploading information into his brain. The chip injects the necessary components into his bloodstream for his cells to start resynthesizing themselves as lead, iron, steel, and titanium instead of carbon.

It's working. It has to work. Nic bites his lip. It begins bleeding, tastes like iron. It's working.

"Beep," he says aloud as he replaces the pieces of the dismantled panel inside the box. He has to practice his robot sounds now so he doesn't sound silly later.

"Bloop," as he walks back to his domicile.

It doesn't take long for someone to notice a very expensive piece of merchandise has been tampered with. The store is put on red alert the next morning. A search is conducted. No video surveillance had been set up in the new department yet, so the WORLDCO Investigation and Execution Squad has to use timeclock punches and the partially recovered, video memory logs of the disabled Security Drones to identify Gordon "Gordy" Freeze as the culprit.

Gordy is sentenced to a permanent greeter position, and it is carried out immediately. His plasticized corpse is put on display at the entrance of the store. Small, electrical impulses sent through his arm every time sensors detect a customer allow him to greet people twenty-four hours a day.

...Awash in a conical tube. The ends not truly ends, but rather the beginning of extensions of more tube at smaller or larger scales...

Nic hasn't shown up for his shift, so is not aware of these happenings. His co-workers are too worried about being accused of the crime to notice him missing.

...Run. Run, run, run. The tube gets smaller. Am I getting bigger? Stop. Turn around and run the other way. I am shrinking. Yes, the tube is growing larger and I am shrinking...

Nic is still at his domicile, lying in bed and trying his hardest to believe he's dreaming.

...Try going at it sideways. See it different. Hamster in a wheel. The path is infinite. Sound of bugs skittering on the other side of the tube...

"Central processing unit online. Attempting connection with ship."

Nic feels the voice like he feels his thoughts. He thinks maybe he should sit up, or drink a glass of water, or tell himself to wake up. He bites the inside of his cheek. It's soft. He is soft.

"Am I dying?" he thinks.

Dying before his dream comes true. No robot-self in his future, only endless tube for the worthless, soft nothing that he is.

An intense burn hits his frontal lobes and spreads down into his body. His brain feels cauterized. He lurches forward into a sitting position and blood shoots from his nose. He wants to wipe it, but he can no longer move his body.

"Connection established with ship. Sensors online. Navigation online. Engines online."

"I'm not a ship," Nic's inner voice screams, hoping the computer chip will hear him and understand.

"Initiating engine test," the chip responds, ignoring Nic if it can hear him at all.

Nic's head turns to the right. He did not issue this command to the muscles in his neck. A rush of thin white liquid pours out of his mouth, down his body, and pools onto the blanket.

"Initiating sonar test."

Nic cries out, more liquid exits his mouth. His body involuntarily coughs to keep from choking.

"Initiating second stage engine test."

His left arm rises up, then his right. Both sit suspended in mid-air, his two remaining fingers and his eight nubs stretched apart, stiffly pointing outward.

"Previous damage to front left and right wings logged. Attempting repair request with WORLDCO Sol System Service Center. Network failure. Setting coordinates for WORLDCO Sol System Service Center, 10014 W. Nebulus Road, WORLDCO Colony #85, Saturn."

At the pit of Nic's being a small twinge is felt, like a spider leg pricking a microfine length of web to test its durability. A cooling sensation emanates from this pit, lessening the burning feeling.

"Running navigational diagnostics. Navigation systems nominal. Waiting for engine response. Waiting. Waiting. System standby."

Nic regains himself. He crumples off the bed onto the floor. A hard inhale and instant weeping. His bowels release into his pajama pants. He crawls into the shower and attempts to scrub whatever he had just experienced off his skin.

"It had to be a nightmare," he tells himself as he leaves his domicile. A look around him and everything else appears normal. He wonders if he is still on Earth, or if he, along with the entire store, has somehow been transported to Saturn. There is no ammonia smell, a sure tip off that you're on the gas giant.

He hurries to his department. Perhaps no one has noticed his absence all morning. Upon arriving, he's surprised to find himself out of breath. He shrugs it off as frayed nerves. Nic's shift supervisor stands by the cashier's desk, staring off into nothing. Nic tip-toes behind him slowly.

"Crazy shit, huh," the supervisor says, stopping Nic in his tracks. "All for a chip not worth more than a couple million dollars. Truly pitiful."

The supervisor looks over at Nic, "Hey, did you gain weight?"

Nic is still processing the first statement when his brain slams the breaks down on his supervisor's question. He glances down at himself. He's particularly rotund around the midsection, looking less normal than usual and more like a giant pair of testicles with spindly legs.

"Um," Nic says.

"Listen, things are fucking nuts here today. Why don't you take the day off and get some rest? You look like shit."

Another brain burn, a pulse of otherness that doesn't belong. Nic grimaces. He could use a day off.

"Thanks, boss."

Nic wobbles over to the Medical Doctor aisle.

"Hmm," says the doctor, eyeing his gut through a magnifying glass. "Interesting. The surface of your skin appears less than solid, almost gaseous. You're rounding out quite nicely, this slight bulge at your waistline indicates you are nearly a perfect oblate spheroid."

Nic's body is now so spherical he's having trouble standing up, let alone take a step. He no longer has arms or legs, and all that keeps him from rolling away are his two feet. His thumb pokes out one side of his ballooned body, his middle finger out the other. He doesn't even have a neck anymore; his face stretches across the top of his body.

"Kawn eww fischh may," Nic strains to ask, sounding more like a gurgled gasp for air.

"What's there to fix?" The doctor replies, "The swelling is most probably a direct result of your eating habits. I told you to stop with the metal. You didn't listen. Now your body is reacting. You did this to yourself. No more metal, and pray to god the swelling reduces."

Nic feels ashamed. He needs the doctor and three customer's help to get pushed out of the aisle.

"To hell with him," Nic thinks. He decides to shuffle his way over to the hardware department and eat his way out of misery. Despite his size, he realizes he hasn't ingested so much as a staple all day.

The pulsating burn spreads to his heart. It's in rhythm with each beat. It's getting worse. Blood is leaking out of his ears. When he gets to the hardware department, he's wheezing and coughing up the thin white liquid, only now there's bits of purple and yellow in it.

Nic is worried.

His clothes rip and fall off him. He catches his reflection in the mirror. It's a pink ball of flesh. His dream has turned malignant. Where is his smooth steel frame? His double jointed, fully articulated titanium limbs? All he sees is flesh. He is so concentrated on his flesh that he fails to notice a small layer of dirt, dust, and fluff bits is encircling his midsection.

He's completely famished. He wants to take care of his appearance, but his stomach wants metal. Maybe if he eats enough, the flesh will change into something stronger. Maybe his skin will take on a more metallic

color at least.

The two clerks working the hardware department stare right at him, making no attempt to hide their disgust. Morbid thoughts of seeing Nic pop flash across their minds.

There's no chance of him sneaking off with anything to eat. Nic resigns himself to merely staring at the nuts, bolts, screws, and nails.

A box of flat head screws begins shaking, launches into the air, and flies toward Nic. His mind instinctively thinks to duck, but his body doesn't have the appendages to respond.

The box bursts open and a ring of screws form around him. They're orbiting him along with the dust and dirt particles. His brain flashes another wave of intense burns. His scalp tears and steam rises up out of it.

*...The tube is folding in on itself. The bugs are all getting squashed...*

"Internal temperature fluctuation. Error. Internal temperature exceeding maximum operational limits. Error. Temperature at 11,000 degrees centigrade and rising. Error. Help--"

Hammers, wrenches and other tools are now joining the screws. Soon clothing racks from the department across the walkway are inching toward him. Customers walking by are having a hard time walking away, their carts wheel right at him. The Hardware department clerks are gripping onto shelves to keep from being pulled in.

Nic's eyes fall out. He begins to laugh, causing his skin to undulate in waves around his body. The pain doesn't bother him anymore. His size doesn't bother him anymore. His flesh is no longer a problem.

He feels aisle after aisle come crashing into each other, piling all around him in a giant circle, moving with him as he moves.

The doctor gets smashed between two of the aisles. The cute bald-headed prostitute from the Red Light aisle cries out as her legs are pinned between submarines from the Aquatic Warfare department.

Nic's supervisor is crushed under a pile of three thousand inch, flatscreen TVs. He can sense all this happening around him, revolving around him.

He feels something new. He feels content. Never has such a feeling entered him before and it is the greatest feeling he's ever had. His last thought before his brain bursts into flame is thinking this turned out better than becoming a robot. He has become WORLDCO, instead. Nic is everything, and everything is perfect.







# BRONSON'S SHARK TANK

## BY G. ARTHUR BROWN

Bronson, the very rich American, arrived at his London flat accompanied by no fanfare after working and travelling 72 hours straight to promote his latest whatever. He was not greeted by Leeko and Kona, his sharks, who were not swimming in their shark tank. The tank, however, was not empty, but filled with a red-pink gelatin. Bronson tossed his komodo-skin briefcase (retail \$25k) angrily onto his sofa (\$150k).

"I'm rich," he cried out. "How are people supposed to realize that if I don't have a tank full of sharks awaiting them upon entry to my apartment?" No one answered, mostly because there was no one else within earshot, but also because the question was rhetorical. He paced back and forth momentarily before approaching the enormous tank. He leaned over at a very awkward angle to read a small, metallic label at its base. As quickly as he could, he dialed the assistance number provided on the label.

Ring, ring.

"Hello, this is Nigel speaking. How can I be of assistance today?" The tone of the Englishman's voice was pleasant even if distorted by cellular encoding and tiny speakers, which produced an effect not unlike two cans on the ends of a taut string.

"I'm having some trouble with my shark tank."

"Could you give me the model number, sir?"

He read again from the little label: "SRGST 5000."

"Ah, the Super-Rich Guy Shark Tank. Brilliant choice, sir."

"Well, I am super-rich," Bronson admitted abashedly, because this was within the dictates of the instructional book that rich Americans received upon arrival in London. Don't deny, just show some shame. "I am also American."

"Good choice on that part, too, sir. Canadian wouldn't have suited a fine gentleman like yourself. What seems to be the problem with your SRGST 5000?"

"My sharks are not in it. I came home from work, and my sharks have vanished."

"Is the tank empty then, sir?"

"No, it seems to be full of gelatin."

"Jelly is it, sir?"

Bronson pondered for a moment. "Yes... not jam. Jell-o, gelatin, jelly. Whatever you guys call it over here."

"And, if I may ask, what color is the jelly, sir?"

"Pinkish red."

"Oh, very good, sir. Sounds like it's strawberry. Wouldn't have done so well with lime, now would we? But strawberry, I think we can work with that. Allow me to consult the check list, and I'll see what I can help you with."

Bronson wondered at this. He wanted to ask, aren't we in the computer age? But he thought better of it for the sake of expediency. He was in England, after all, not the USA. He did not yet completely understand their foreign ways.

"Ah, first let me ask you, sir, did you by any chance take the sharks out, sell them off, drain the tank, and then fill it up with jelly?"

Bronson thought hard. "No, no. I would most certainly remember a thing like that."

"Quite right, sir. One does tend to remember. But, just to be safe, I thought I'd start with the first item on the checklist. Now, moving along, have you hired a person to assist in the care of your tank?"

"I've got a guy. Abdel. He does a very good job."

"Now, might this Abdel have taken the sharks out, sold them off, drained the tank, and then filled it with jelly?"

"Well, I highly doubt it. But, I'll ask him." Bronson walked over to the far wall, leaned over again at an awkward angle, and opened a small cabinet perhaps three feet in height. A short, dark man was crouched inside, motionless but open-eyed. "Abdel? Are you awake?" The man popped up, startled, banging his head on the top of the cupboard. He was apparently trying to stand before he realized he was in his sleeping room. Bronson winced. "Ouch, you okay there?"

Abdel rubbed his head and spoke in his Pakistani accent, "Yes sir, I am very fine indeed. Do you require assistance tonight? I am always glad to please."

"Abdel, you didn't happen to do anything special to the sharks today, did you?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Bronson. Today is my day off. I spent the whole day in my room."

"What about yesterday?"

"No, nothing special, Mr. Bronson. They swam around. I tested the water. I fed them only one orphan as per your instructions. Is there something that does not meet with your complete satisfaction, sir?"

"Yes. Now my sharks are gone, and there is gelatin in the tank."

"Gelatin? That is indeed alarming! Most upsetting! How much gelatin?"

"Filled to the brim, Abdel. I am not pleased."

"I can assure you that I had nothing to do with this! Woe is me! Poor Leeko and Kona! Oh, Allah!"

Bronson shut the door, muffling the cries of the servant inside. He returned to his call. "No, he had nothing to do with this."

"Says so, does he, sir?"

With a slight tone of annoyance, Bronson said, "I have absolute faith in Abdel."

"Yes, it never is numbers one or two on the list. Still, we have to be thorough, sir. It just wouldn't do to miss an obvious one. We wouldn't want that snake to bite us in the proverbial arse, now would we? Now,

moving along, have you recently made enemies of your neighbors, done something they might want to get revenge for perhaps?"

"I don't know. I'm at work most of the time. I don't really spend much time in my flat, so... I'll go with a cautious 'no,' but don't quote me on that."

"No quotes, indeed, sir. We'll rule the neighbors out. Frankly, I'll let you in on a little secret. This sort of thing happens a lot with the SRGST 5000, though we hate to admit it. Not the first time the sharks have gone missing and jelly turns up in their place. Just an engineering error, I believe."

"So, now what do I do?"

"First thing's first, we simply must get all that jelly out of the tank. No use in leaving it in, is there? Best way to do it: throw something of a soiree."

"A party?"

"Gala event, sir. Invite all your friends, especially those with a particular fondness for the eating of jelly. Serve a dish to every guest, and you'll be that much closer to a resolution."

"Is it going to be safe to eat? I mean to say, I'm not even sure that it is gelatin."

"We'll sort that straight away. Sending our agent over now."

Five seconds passed before Bronson's doorbell sounded. He opened the door, and a pygmy chimp capered in, wearing a cowboy hat and a t-shirt bearing a picture of President Bush. The caption read: "I'm the President, so kiss my ass." The chimpanzee looked up at Bronson, extended both middle fingers, and blew a rather loud raspberry, then hopped up and down, squealing in laughter.

"Uh... there's a chimp here in a cowboy hat."

"Yes, sorry about that. It's his night off, you see, but he was closer than any of our agents on duty. Might be a little bit cheeky, but he agreed to do the testing. So, simply stand aside and let get on with the task in hand would be my advice, sir. We'll cover any damages, of course."

The chimp ran down a short hall, thumping on the wall three times, until he came to the bedroom door, which he thumped on twice. He then turned around, shuffled on all fours back down the hall until he discovered the kitchen. After a short survey of his

surroundings, he commenced opening each drawer and cabinet, tossing everything he found onto the floor until he held one spoon and one bowl. He tottered awkwardly on just his back legs to the living room, hopped up on the tank and spooned out a bowl of the gelatin.

“He’s got a bowl of the stuff,” Bronson said into his phone.

“Good. Now leave him to eat it, sir, and we’ll see how he fares in a half hour’s time. In the meantime, I’ll recite some Blake for you if I may. ‘When my mother died I was very young, / And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry “Weep! weep! weep! weep!” / So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep....’”

Bronson eyed the ape, watching for the most infinitesimal change in demeanor or breathing pattern. Nigel continued with the poetry, although he knew Bronson wasn’t paying attention. He slipped in a “What light through yonder window breaks” and Bronson didn’t even chuckle. Nigel did not bother to call out the American on his ignorance. This was in keeping with the lessons of his manual “How to Speak to Rich Americans over the Phone.”

After twenty-nine minutes had passed, Bronson finally interrupted Nigel: “The chimp looks fine. He’s hopping around on my coffee table. He tore up one of my adult magazines. I don’t think he approves of smut.”

“Smashing. Of course we’ll reimburse you for the torn girlie mags, sir. But good news on the soiree front, what? Have your guests eat up all that jelly, then give me a call back.”

“Yeah, sure. Okay. I’ll do it tomorrow night. Sounds fine. Talk to you later.” After hanging up, Bronson realized the chimp was still in the apartment. “Hey, you. Don’t you think it’s time to go?”

The chimp said nothing but cowered from Bronson’s stern tone. He hung his head, picked his cowboy hat up off the floor, and left. It almost broke the rich man’s heart to see the poor creature in such a dejected state. “I’ll have to remember to invite him to the party.”

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The party was going nicely, but Bronson did overhear a particularly well-dressed socialite say to her friend, “I thought this fellow was rich. I don’t even see any sharks.” They muffled their laughter as he passed

them, face a little red, suit a little rumpled. He hadn’t been able to sleep the night before. Something about all that gelatin just made him uneasy. The guests seemed to be enjoying it though. They treated it like a cute themed affair: Jelly Night. Before too long, the entire tank had been emptied, save the usual scum that settles to the bottom. Abdel would have to take care of that in the morning.

A burley, middle-aged man with a bushy moustache approached Bronson, slapped him on the back, and said, “What an absolutely terrific place you’ve got here. I must say, most Americans would have something gauche, say a wide screen television, to ruin the ambience. But I like your style. Though one wonders, why keep the dessert in a shark tank? If I were you, I’d get myself a few sharks for it. Here’s my card.” It read:

Adrian Hawthorne

Shark Importer

It also gave the address where one could find his Fabulous Lair of Sharks. “Not just sharks, mind you,” Hawthorne added. “I’m the only man in town who can set you up with proper barracuda. The other lads’ll give you a dogfish with glued-on glass needles for teeth. Since I know you are a man of refined tastes, I know you wouldn’t settle for that rubbish. I’ll get you real barracuda, no questions asked. The other lads’ll ask questions, too. ‘Whatcha want with them barracuders?’ they’ll say. Don’t take any cheek. Deal with Hawthorne. I’m your man.” His spiel was much like a commercial.

Bronson waited to see if a jingle would play before saying, “Thank you, Mr. Hawthorne. I’ll keep you in mind.”

The party progressed well into the wee hours. Bronson was antsy and aloof, but couldn’t bring himself to send his guests away. They all appeared to be having such a splendid time. Some had even fallen asleep on his sofa, in his recliners, or curled up in corners using their dinner jackets as pillows. Bronson followed precedent, and retired for the few hours of sleep he could manage before he had to get up to go promote his latest whatever.

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He awoke around 6:30, stumbled out of bed and into his living room where the sleeping partygoers had all been replaced, or, rather, transformed. Large cocoons littered his rooms, smeared with gooey webs

that linked them inextricably to his furniture and carpeting. "Oh, hell. What next?"

He dialed the assistance number again. Ring, ring. "Hello, this is Nigel speaking. How can I be of assistance today?"

"My guests have all formed cocoons."

"Ah, that's a good sign. But tell me this, did you flood your flat as soon as they fell asleep, sir?"

"Of course not, why would I do a thing like that?"

"Tisk tisk, sir. Really should have called me back like I instructed. If you had called me after they ate the jelly, I would have told you the next item on the list would be to allow them to fall asleep, then flood your flat with salt water. Won't be much good to you now as I expect they're already dead."

Bronson's heart palpitated. His palms sweated. He went to his kitchen to retrieve a very sharp Japanese steak knife and then returned to cut one of the cocoons. He peeled back the scaly husk and revealed a slimy shark in an ill-fitting tuxedo, eyes staring abnormally blankly at him, even for shark eyes. "Dead," he confirmed. "This is great. An apartment full of dead sharks."

"We'll get this settled straight away," Nigel said.

Perhaps eight seconds passed before the door bell sounded. It was the chimp again, this time in a blue jumpsuit, accompanied by several colleagues.

Bronson shrugged. "I'm sorry I forgot to invite you to the party. But from the looks of it, that mistake worked out for the best."

The chimp gave a dismissive wave. He and the other chimps scampered off to ransack the kitchen. They returned, each with a steak knife and fork in hand, teeth bared. Bronson began to worry harder.

"Yes," Nigel said, "we'll have this sorted in no time."

**Brief Bio: G. Arthur Brown, when clothed, dashes madly to achieve ultimate savings in the market place. His first novel, Kitten, was released by Eraserhead Press as part of the 2012-13 New Bizarro Author Series. Jacob's Ladder and Videodrome are two of his favorite movies. He is single and was raising two plants, but they died.**





# *Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut*-A Review by Courtney Alsop



How do you adequately describe a title as sublime as the original *Deadly Premonition* for the Xbox 360? It polarized the gaming community into the “I hate it” camp and the “better than an orgasm” groupies. The protagonist and the characters populating Greenvale make it one of the most original and strange stories to be experienced.

FBI special agent Francis York Morgan (York) has been sent to Greenvale to solve a murder that might link to several others across the US. Red seeds have been found in or on women, and they are killed in a brutal and ritualistic manner. Greenvale is, oddly enough, home to several supernatural occurrences when it rains or when York is by himself, including giant killer dogs, an axe-wielding raincoat killer, and Shadows (zombie-like abominations). *Deadly Premonition* is more than the standard crime solving game that clutter video game store shelves. York is one of the most complex and quirky characters I have ever come across. Frequently he is seen with a hand to a large scar on his face, speaking to a gentleman named

Zach. The milk in his morning coffee gives him cryptic messages, and he actively seeks signs in his everyday life. He is always with a smile plastered on his face, even when he is investigating the crime scene of the latest victim. A film buff, he will speak to Zach about movies and music he enjoys. This game is a perfect medley of grotesque murder mystery and character-driven plot. What makes it bizarre and unsettling? It is not the murder of the beautiful young woman named Anna; it's the characters that become more twisted and unusual as the game progresses.

North America saw an exclusive release on the Xbox 360 in 2010, and in April 2013 we saw a director's cut version released exclusively for the PS3. The director's cut version has a revamped control scheme, HD visuals, a new narrative framing device, additional scenarios, and DLC. Is *The Director's Cut* version worth the budget title price? I say that the hardcore fanatics of the game should purchase this version if they don't mind lag. This port has a lot to offer (as does the original), but dragging York through the lag when you are fighting a horde of enemies is tedious when the original isn't plagued by lag. As of the time of writing, the publisher is aware of this and is not working on a patch. The new control design is still unintuitive. The new HD graphics are nice, but not ground breaking. The difficulty setting option has been completely removed. The framing narrative only sets up the player for a possible sequel (not that the first one made you think all was over). Instead of calling it a director's cut, it should be entitled *Deadly Premonition: Please Buy My Budget Game I Want to Make a Sequel*.

*Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut* has a lot to offer and to keep the player guessing who the raincoat killer is, along with the secret of what happened to York's parents, and who exactly is Zach. It is definitely a game that needs to be experienced before you can cast judgment upon it. It is a game that is unforgettable, if that is a good thing or a bad thing, is up to the player.

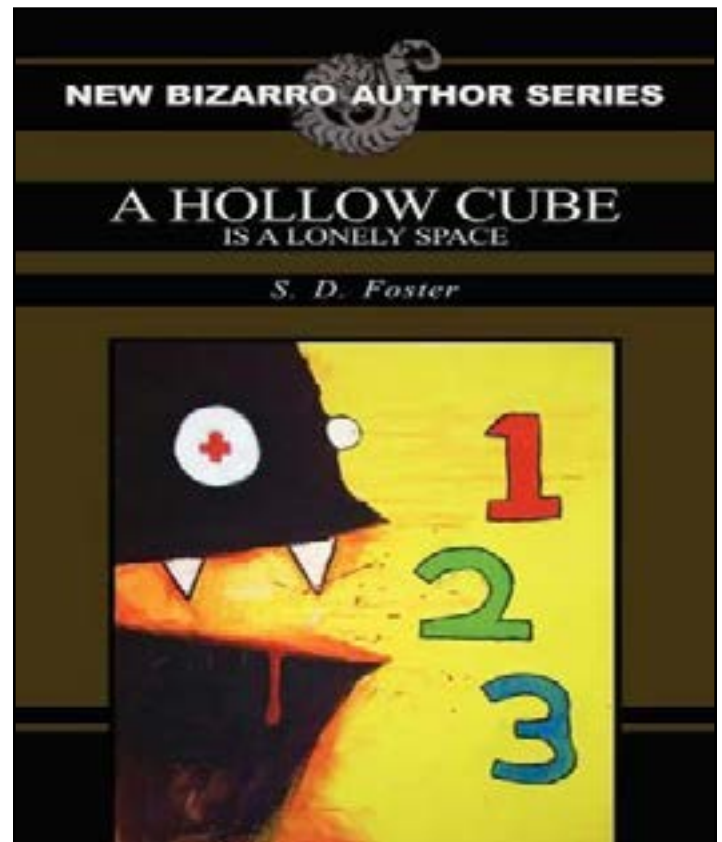


# *A Hollow Cube is a Lonely Space* by S.D Foster-A Review by Courtney Alsop

These 23 short stories most span four eBook pages, and some are only a page long. Overall, these stories are humorous and fast reads that are independent of each other. Largely satirical in nature, the stories point out our inane lives and the faults in our society. These themes are conveyed through stories of the life of a clementine, a retiring monster, and a rat that moved to the city, among others. The stories are implausible, such as a snowman being alive, a rat or a chimp moving to the city and getting a job, or how you can live without a head. You can't argue with logic with these stories. If you suspend your disbelief and let the story take you down their peculiar roads, you'll read some odd tales.

My favourites are "The Ambition of Youth" and the title story "A Hollow Cube is a Lonely Space." In "The Ambition of Youth", a teen must decide what she wants to do with her life, and she decides that she is going to be a quadriplegic motivational speaker. Unfortunately, she has functioning limbs and must overcome these obstacles to achieve great fame, complete with autobiography. "A Hollow Cube is a Lonely Space" is about a man who lives in a cube with black walls and sparse furniture. Instead of his regular fast-food meal, he is given a kids meal, complete with a plastic figurine of a woman in a pink dress. She speaks to him and they start a relationship, the other figurines become their children, and marital bliss ensues...or not.

Overall, the writing is highly approachable, though the subject matter is not (fruit rape- seriously, this happens). *A Hollow Cube is a Lonely Space* is a short, fun read of philosophical introspection wrapped in absurd comedy. If you're afraid of overly-complex bizarro fiction, I recommend this as a starter.

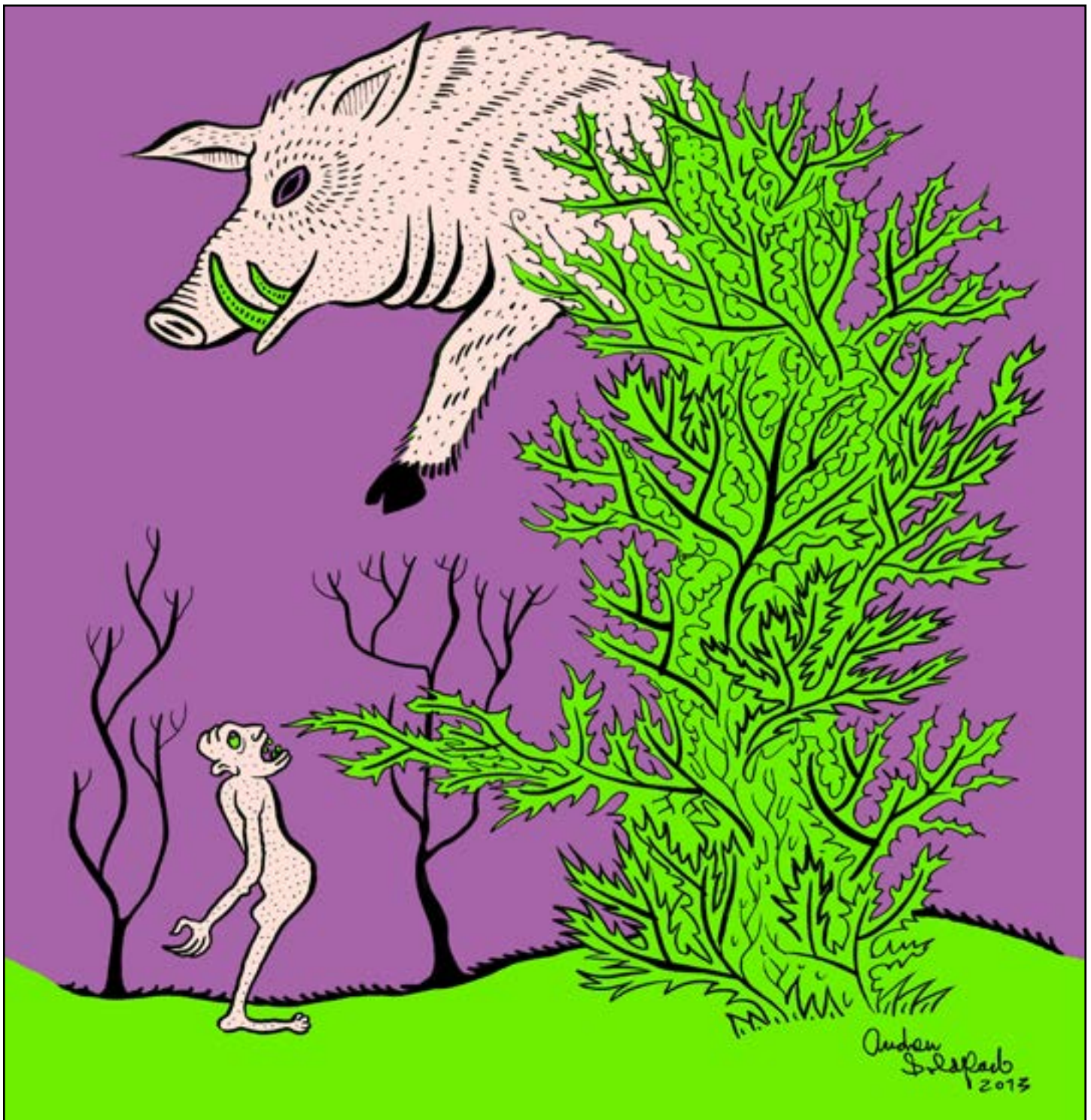






“Atropa Mandragora”

Should you find yourself wandering through the village square and you come across a hanged man, you can take advantage of the situation twofold. Firstly, the last drops of semen from the dangling member of the villain will take root in the soil and produce the wonderful flower Atropa Mandragora, which bestows magical powers on the possessor. Be warned though that this root (the Screaming Mandrake) emits a shriek when pulled from the soil that will kill dead all within earshot. Thus, you will want to train a hound to do your dirty work for you, while you stand far away. The dog will die. Secondly, cut off the criminal's left (sinister) hand. Place candles on the fingertips and holding the Glory Hand as you walk the streets, you will find that all the townsfolk you pass by will be fall into a deep slumber. Then you can rob them. But be careful, lest you be caught and hanged, and someone then come to cut off your hand (and steal your man-root).



“4”

Do Not Touch This Plant! Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) is a Federally listed noxious weed. Its sap, in combination with moisture and sunlight, can cause severe skin and eye irritation, painful blistering, permanent scarring and blindness. Contact between the skin and the sap of this plant occurs either through brushing against the bristles on the stem or breaking the stem or leaves. What to do if you come in contact with giant hogweed: This plant poses a serious health threat; see your physician if you think you have been burned by giant hogweed. If you think you have giant hogweed on your property, do NOT touch it. How do you identify giant hogweed? Giant hogweed is a biennial or perennial herb in the carrot family (Apiaceae) which can grow to 14 feet or more. Its hollow, ridged stems grow 2-4 inches in diameter and have dark reddish-purple blotches. Its large compound leaves can grow up to 5 feet wide. Its white flower heads can grow up to 2 1/2 feet in diameter. Children have been known to cut the stalk and use it like a telescope. When they hold it up to their eye and get sap around the eye, it can cause some serious damage. The most recent outbreak of Giant Hogweed was found near an embassy in Washington D.C.



# JOE HILL





# NOS4A2: A Review by Eric Wojciechowski

NOS4A2 is a license plate. It's fastened to the rear of a 1938 Rolls-Royce Wraith, who's owner, Charles Talent Manx, uses to travel into his "inscape". It is a real place to the conjurer but elusive to everyone else. Apparently, everyone has the ability to travel into their own inscape, they just have to know how to use the right tool to get there.

Enter Victoria "Vic" McQueen, our protagonist. As a child, she is able to find things by riding her bicycle through an old wooden bridge. Upon exiting, she finds what she seeks and returns, back through the bridge, from whence she came.

Where as Vic McQueen uses her powers for good, Charles Manx uses his for evil. He captures young children and transports them into Christmasland, a place where it's Christmas time forever. Where the children become...

The story begins with Vic as a child and comes to a climax with her as an adult. As the story progresses, Vic's jumps into her inscape cross paths with the doings of Charles Manx. Vic becomes the only child to ever escape him. It's when she ages into adulthood, they meet again. And between the younger Vic and older Vic, the story...slows...down.

This is the only complaint I have with NOS4A2. It's about two-hundred pages longer than I thought the story deserved. Perhaps the point was to do some serious fleshing of the characters. And that's acceptable for the main characters. But there were minor characters, like Hicks and his Uncle Jim - two characters working hospital security. We are treated to pages of personal backgrounds before the part that matters comes into play. There's another dragging moment when Vic's son, Wayne, gets caught up watching the movements of a butterfly. This clocked in at three pages and although well written, I was thinking, "Let's get on with it".

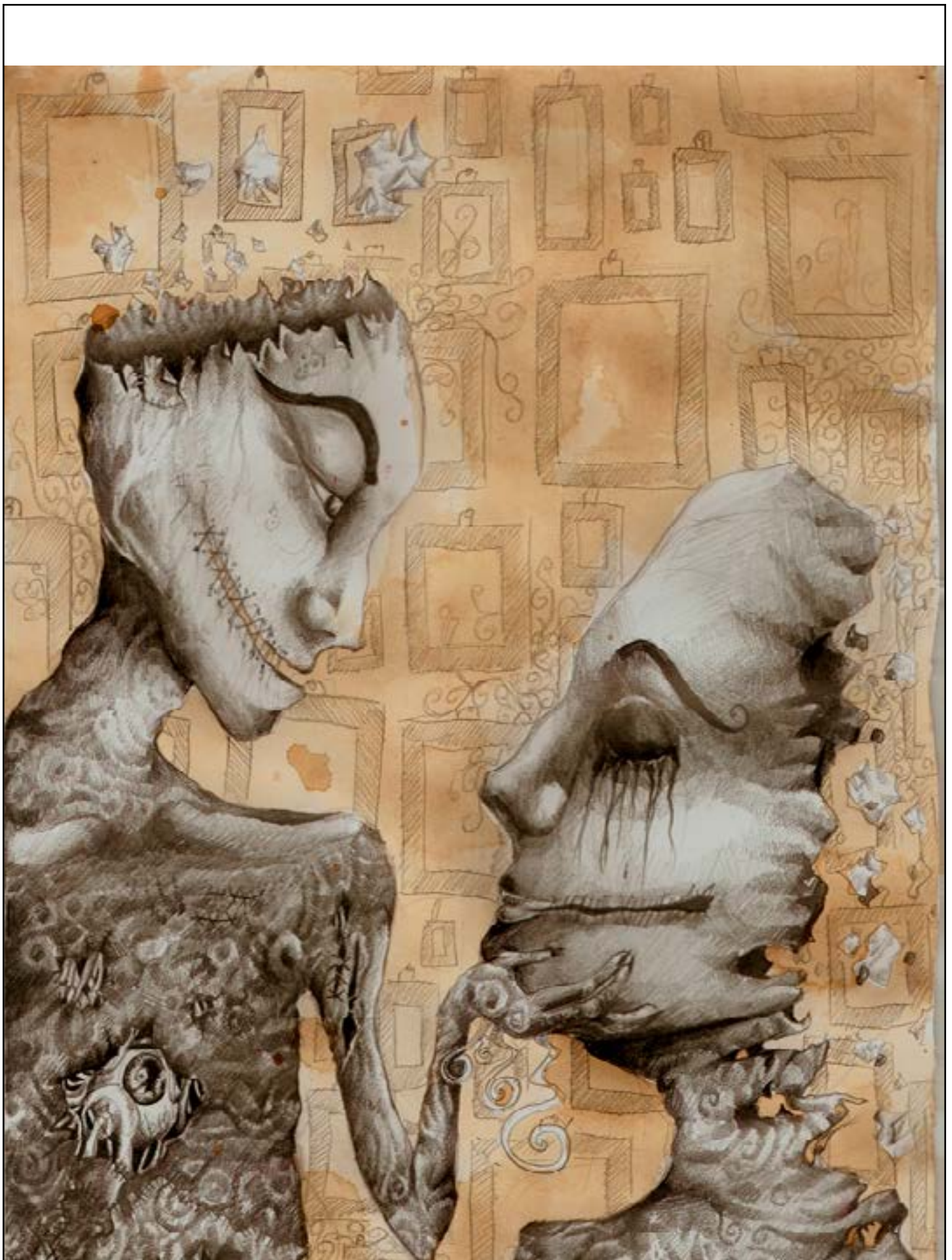
There's also the second fight scene between Vic and Manx which plays out far longer than need be. And then, although police involvement in a serial killer story is inevitable, the main officers come into the story when Manx takes Vic's child. At a moment when Vic should be scrambling to find Manx, she seems very unmotivated for several pages, dragging out the narrative, chatting with the police, taking a

shower. I felt this particular play, when Manx drove off with her son, needed the urgency of a mother losing her child in a crowded shopping mall. Not taking time to dial 911 and filling out paperwork.

But let's dwell on the positives. The first thing I noticed and loved was how chapters blended together. Much of the time, they'd abruptly end mid-sentence before announcing the destination. The sentence would finish by making the next chapter heading that destination. For instance, a chapter might end with, "Vic drove her Triumph to" and when you flip the page, the chapter heading would be "The Library". That's a trick I have never seen before. Another thing I noticed quickly is that Mr. Hill is a genius at similes. I didn't encounter one cliché. Similies like "It was like a clown in the rain with his make up running" used to describe Christmas music in summer, or "The air-conditioning was a relief, almost as good as a glass of cold water with a sprig of mint in it." I felt the chill from that one.

What I enjoyed most about this story was that, at first I yawned, then I was thrilled by the subject. Upon taking up reading I thought, "NOS4A2? Oh, more vampire stuff. More saturation." But Charles Manx isn't quite a vampire, in the traditional sense. He's not biting necks. But he's more than a social vampire, sucking the life out of an otherwise happy person, turning them into depressed beings. He feels new. I like new.

In summary, NOS4A2 ranks as an excellent read, perhaps longer than I felt it deserved, but definitely rich in characters. While not exactly a vampire story, a good twist on an old legend. Combined with the "inscapes", the novel could be considered a baby of Jumper mating with mental blood suckery. And it's not exactly a serial killer story either because Manx doesn't kill his child victims. He takes the children to Christmasland where the child never quite dies, never grows up but becomes...



# BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE PUDDING SPOOKS

By Alex S. Johnson

Of all the men who had occupied the office, few were more ready and prepared than he for a break. He had assembled the elements—an ounce of prime indica, a pinch of Afghan hash, a tube of raspberry flavored blunt wrap and, most important, tunage: The Grateful Dead, four hours of his favorite band jamming on such classics as “Sugar Magnolia,” “Truckin,” “Friend of the Devil” and many more. He withdrew the special Zippo with the American Rose logo from his desk drawer and was about to flame the herb when a persistent knocking at the door shook him from his reverie.

“Mister President, it’s me, Moe Hayden.”

“Damn it, man, why do you always do that? Yes, you can come in. Just lock the door behind you.”

Vice-President Hayden entered the office. He looked haggard and sleep-deprived; his eyes were rimmed with red and his hands were shaking. “I know you hate being interrupted at 4:20,” said Hayden, “but this is an emergency.”

“What kind of damn fool emergency could possibly be so urgent that it can’t wait for a Chief Executive’s Hour of Peace?” said President O’ Bomber. “Oh, hey, I didn’t mean it like that,” he added when he saw Hayden’s hangdog expression. “It’s all good. What’s troubling you, son?”

Hayden grabbed a chair and plunked himself down. “I was just online—no porn, nothing like that, just following some, uh, baseball stories, when I got this e-mail. It’s an operative the Company uses from time to time, mad as a fucking hatter, but his information is always solid. Calls himself Napoleon Brandy. He’s a former circus clown, used to work with Barnum and Bailey before he was kicked out for inappropriate sexual relationships with the fleas. Anyway, Napoleon says that the Pudding Spooks are back in operation. Bill Cosby has a whole new plan for world domination, and this time he won’t be so easily stopped. The pudding has a new ingredient.

I tried to get more details from the operative but I think his account was hacked, because after that it was nothing but clown porn.”

O’ Bomber’s eyes lit up. “Clown porn? You don’t say. Does it involve...the special shoes? Not that I’m into that stuff, of course, but...you can level with me. There’s something about a girl wearing clown shoes and nothing else, except maybe a silk ribbon twined around her capacious white titties. Oh yeah. I remember this chick back in Hawaii...”

“With all due respect, Mr. President, I’d rather not discuss your penchant for circus-related, ahem, erotica. If we don’t act quickly, the entire North American continent will very soon be inundated with a potent brand of chocolate pudding. This breed of Spooks is coming hot out of the factory and they mean business.”

“In other words, it’s the Doomsday Scenario. Genetically-modified Pudding Spooks with an appetite for chaos.”

“Yes, sir. And Cosby’s got a rogue Harvard biochemist working for him. This guy was doing gene-splicing in the crib. When he was just six years old he grew himself a whole new brain, and he’s been pretty much mutating ever since. I saw some pictures of poodles he, er, augmented, and I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since.”

“Very well then, we need to alert Shadow Team 7, get them out into the field.”

“Shadow Team 7, Sir?”

“I’ve got my own damn biochemist. Cosby’s not the only one with connections at Harvard. Dr. Mintzy created the first ham radio set made from actual ham, and that was only a warm-up. You should see what he’s done with Morse Code and earthworms. Fascinating stuff.”

“But Shadow Team 7 is...”

“Yes, I know, it was officially decommissioned in the 60’s. Naturally, we had to tell the public that, because of safety concerns. But you know and I know that the defense of national security cannot and must not be subverted by queasy stomachs. Exploding test subjects or not, Shadow Team 7 lives on. I think I’ll give Dr. Mintzy a shout and see whether he can deploy them rapidly.”

“That’s the Dr. Mintzy, the one who wrote those technical manuals?”

“The one and the same.”

“We’re in good hands then. I must admit I feel a little better now, Mr. President.”

“Good, good. Now let me work my magic and you just go back to those fine-ass clowns or whatever it is you like to look at on the ‘net.”

Hayden smiled. “Thank you, Sir.”

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Griselda Martin looked up from the conveyor belt and was stunned by what she saw. She elbowed her best friend and co-worker, Knutsen Knutsen. “Check it out, it’s him.”

“What do you mean, it’s him? We gotta keep working,” said Knutsen, who was not easily distracted from a task. “The man doesn’t pay us to check things out. If we don’t get this batch of Spooks cooked by 6:00 pm, we might as well not bother to show up tomorrow. Just head over to the Unemployment Office and stand in line. Or hell, maybe do some crack.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s him,” repeated Martin, her voice rising with excitement. “Oh Knutsen, this man has been a hero of mine and the little ones for so many years. I raised my children on his fine food products, and you know how well they turned out.”

“You’re trippin,’” said Knutsen testily. “Cosby?”

“Cosby,” said Martin in an awe-struck whisper.

Sure enough, the octogenarian comedian, avuncular TV icon and all-around nice guy, Bill Cosby, stood at the top of the ramp that led down into the heart of the factory. He raised a bullhorn.

“Good afternoon to you all and I hope you’re having a fabbidity dabbity doo type with the squizzel. I just want you to know that I so much appreciate your fine efforts, each and every one of you, laboring over the new crop of genetically-modified Spooks de doop. Through your commitment and labor we will spread the word about Puddin’ Pops and the many other tasty Jello products available now. I want you to give yourselves a hearty round of applause and remember that the Coz loves you.”

“I feel so emotional,” said Martin. “He really does care.”

“Yeah well,” said Knutsen. “These Spooks won’t cook themselves. Hand me one of those arms, will ya?”

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“Advance...halt!” Dr. Mintzy pivoted on his heels and turned to face the squad. “We are about to engage with an enemy that is almost beyond comprehension,” he said. “A team of secret government operatives whose methods have become...unsound. Not only are they composed of pudding and related food products, but these elements have been tampered with and virally potentiated. We must consider them extremely dangerous. Do not underestimate the Spooks. Those who have done so before...well, just take a look at some of these photographs.” Mintzy pulled a manila folder from his briefcase and passed it to the head of the line. The man’s hand began to shake and he vomited copiously on the ground.

“Don’t worry, son. It’s a natural reaction. When you’ve seen one of your best buddies turned inside out, pumped full of gases and then reduced to widely scattered clumps of viscera and brain matter, you have begun to understand the true face of horror. But that is child’s play to what these creatures are capable of. I saw one of them rip out a man’s eyeballs and play ping-pong with them, and that was just the prologue to a long and blood-spattered tragicomedy. I laughed and cried and ultimately gave it one thumb up and one thumb down. But fear not. You have been trained to counter every trick, every decoy, every vile strategy known to these rogue agents. You are the milk-white essence of everything honorable about America. I applaud you. Some of you will not return from this mission, or will emerge as shattered wrecks barely able to distinguish a nose from a buttock. I hope that in the last moments before brain activity



ceases to function you will take a nanosecond to clap yourself on the back—provided minimal motor coordination—in recognition of the service you have rendered to your country. Now go out there and bring me some Spook heads.”

Shadow Team 7 saluted and filed off to the waiting transport vehicles.

Bill Cosby switched off the monitor and began to laugh. “Oh man, these guys are funny...funnier than my ‘Noah’ sketch back in the dibbledy wibble. They have no chance, no chance at all. But I gotta give them credit. Either they’re very brave or very foolish, but anyone willing to face the fury of upgraded Pudding Spooks has a very special quality.”

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Back at the Oval Office, President O’ Bomber returned to his meditations on the fine points of playing with Uncle John’s Band. He knew that out there in the field, beings composed of chocolate pudding were facing off against a valiant crew armed only with Morse Code tappers, ham radios made from real ham, and technical manuals that described in excruciating detail how to use these devices. Of course they would not succeed, and he wrote himself a memo detailing the elaborate cover-up of any evidence of the skirmish. In many ways his job resembled a good game of chess, only the pieces were alive and prone to the squishiest of ends. He then triple-encrypted the memo, posted it to his super-secret blog site for the amusement of a handful of deeply cynical members of his administration and deleted the original file. He was now ready for Hayden.

“Come in,” he said before Hayden had even knocked.

The door opened. “How did you know it was me?”

“Because you’re so predictable. Now let me ask you something, before you say a word. Did you pitch a tent?”

“Sir?”

“Did you get wood, you know, have an erection? Man, that was some brutal action out there. Guys getting strangled with their own intestines, organs yanked out and gnawed like jerky while the victim still thrashed, impaled on a two-foot spiked dildo? Choked to death on puddin’ cocks? War porn, baby. Nothing like it.”

“Permission to speak freely, Sir?”

“Yeah man, it’s cool. What’s on your mind?”

“Sometimes I think you may be the most dangerous man on the planet.”

The President began to chuckle. He then laughed heartily, rocking from side to side, tears pouring down his cheeks. He slammed a hand down on his desk, shaking with hilarity. “Hayden, that’s both the nicest compliment I’ve ever had and the funniest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” He wiped his cheeks with a tissue. “Okay, go ahead. I just had to get that out of my system.”

“It was a rout, Sir. Not only did the Pudding Spooks destroy Seal Team 7, pieces of them having been showing up in courier packages for the past half an hour. I was just hand-delivered a chunk of slimy vertebrae. What do we do now?”

“The usual, I guess. Round up every single man, woman and child with possible knowledge of the operation and subject them to terminal mind-rape. And if that doesn’t work, well, hell, there’s no mess that a good drone-drop won’t fix. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going back to the tunage. You can stick around if you like, but I will ignore you.”

“Very good, sir. Would you have any Pink Floyd on hand? Rodger Water’s voice always relaxes me. It’s so dark, sardonic and British.”

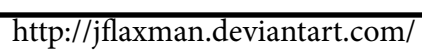
O’ Bomber tossed an iPod at the Vice-President. “Loaded up, everything from Atom Heart Mother to The Wall. I made the selections personally.”

“One more thing,” said Hayden.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about that ‘most dangerous man’ crack. Sometimes I get a brain fart.”

“Forgotten and laid to rest rotten, my man.”





# Quit the Chameleon Picnic

by Andrew Wayne Adams

Fathers always pass their wisdom on. They have to, no stopping it. It has the force of a bowel movement, and is just as pungent and embarrassing. They get an alarmed look and grunt a little and suddenly wisdom comes plopping out of their mouth, landing with a wet smack on the floor.

We both stare at it. One of us has to clean it up, and it won't be him. He's too embarrassed. He clears his throat, checks his watch, then shuffles away, mumbling something about taxes.

The wisdom is the size and shape of a small potato. It pulsates like a heart. Its body bristles with muddy fur, wiry twigs jutting from it like feelers. It creeps toward me across the kitchen tile, inching imperceptibly, a trail of slime extending behind it. It has spider eyes and a tiny toothless mouth. It smells like halitosis and plastic.

I grab a roll of paper towels. I unwind sheet after sheet, building a mitt the thickness of a book. Even through so many layers, the heat of the wisdom reaches my palm, a wet and unholy heat, and I race to the trash and dump the wisdom in and cover it with more paper towels. Then I wipe up the slime from the tile, which takes a long time because the slime has already congealed and clings to the floor like tissue to bone.

Dad comes back, sees me still cleaning up his mess, and says, "The taxes," then starts to turn and leave again. But another bolus of wisdom escapes his mouth along with the words, emerging like a surprise burp. I am on the floor, wiping up slime, my father above me as the wisdom drops from him. No time to dodge it. It lands on my head.

I scream, disgusted with existence, with my particular existence. The wet lump glues itself to my head. It throbs, hot. I tear at it, and it bites my hand. Its wiry feelers pierce down into my skull, into my brain.

My father shouts, "The taxes!" And he turns to flee.

I jump at his legs, knocking him down before he can escape. I climb over him and push my face into his, shouting, "We have to talk!" My brain fills with wires, with common words. "Help me!"

He sighs, closes his eyes.

His head starts to inflate.

I back away from the ballooning head, but it keeps coming, expanding toward me as I scramble backward across the kitchen floor. As the eyes grow huge, I can see into them. There is a picnic happening down among the rods and cones, an eternal picnic imprinted on the red, green, and blue flowers, my father and my mother on a blanket sharing fruit and meat and talking for long hours. My father must see this always, the way spots sometimes form in our vision and never leave.

His retinas wilt, the rods and cones drooping, and the tiny picnic ends, two corpses decomposing and a wind lifting the blanket away to nowhere, scraps blowing like crows through the concave sky.

His head almost fills the kitchen now. A nostril tries to engulf my foot, and I kick it. I hate this, hate seeing this. I have seen heads inflate before, several throughout my life. My kindergarten teacher, Mrs Hegel—it happened to her, in front of all the kids. It's what happens when a person gives up, truly gives up. It's embarrassing to see.

"Dad, stop!"

He doesn't, of course. He's given up.

I squeeze past his enormous head, pushing with my elbows and fists, and make it out of the kitchen. I know what happens next—what happened to Mrs Hegel—and I don't wait around for it, my

focus moving on, my mind on myself as I hurry from the house to the garage. There came a point, just as her head was crushing us to death against the walls of the classroom, when the substance of Mrs Hegel changed, her ballooning head breaking apart into a mass of chameleons. The chameleons scattered throughout the room, taking on the colors of their surroundings, dispersing into invisibility, an irrevocable blending of lizard and world. There were flowers on the sill, red, green, and blue, and a lizard stopped in front of them, shrouded itself in their appearance, and never moved again. That was the way it happened. The way it always happens. The pieces of a head crawl apart and hide.

In the garage, I dump a toolbox on the ground and sift through the confusion until I find a broken wine bottle. For all the wisdom he coughed up involuntarily, my father never taught me about tools. But this broken wine bottle looks right, something about it inherently suited to my purpose. There is even some scent remaining, and in a second I can name it: cabernet sauvignon. It was my mother's favorite.

I use the broken bottle as a knife to hack at the wisdom attached to my head. The wisdom squirts blood, crying through its tiny toothless mouth. Its blood is full of explosions and boredom. My scalp bleeds also, because I am not being very careful, but there is nothing in my blood, neither explosions nor boredom, picnics nor lizards. I slice at the wisdom until it stops crying, and then I reach up and grasp its dead little body, and I pull.

The garage fills with exhaust.

The dead little body rips loose from my head. I toss it away and inspect my bloody scalp. The wires are still in my skull, broken off inside, their exposed ends too short and slippery to grip. Dead, the wires reach deep into my brain, deeper than I can feel.

The exhaust makes me cough. There's no ventilation in here. Also, no car. We got rid of the car. We had to, after Mom. Straight to the junkyard it went, its upholstery still reeking of the fumes of oblivion. Straight to scrap, because it made us sick to think of anyone driving it ever again.

Coughing, I go to open a window. But every time I reach for it, the window leaps away. The door, too, leaps away when I try to apprehend it. No way out; no way to get air. I have to at least shut the car off, then.

But we got rid of the car.

My vision doubles, then quadruples, then starts to crackle with black pinholes. I slump to the floor. So tired, going under the waves. It would feel nice to sleep... to just give up and sleep... to quit all this....

No!

I jump up and stumble around and run into something large and solid in the middle of the garage. Something invisible. My hands inspect the invisible thing, following its contours and learning its textures, and in a second I can name it: a car. A car made of chameleons.

I find the door and climb in, then search blindly for the ignition. My hand closes on the key, and I turn it toward me to kill the engine, to stop the fumes and the fog forever. But the key is already turned off. The engine is not actually running.

The wires in my brain, the exhaust in the garage—somehow the two are interrelated. Different densities of one substance. My father and my mother. Line and plane. Order, chaos, sun, moon. No, I don't know.

My head starts to inflate.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!”

I keep trying to kill the engine, but of course the engine is already dead. So I turn the key the other way, and the engine starts, sounding like trumpets and kettledrums. Slowly, the air begins to clear. The exhaust returns to its source, sucked by invisible tailpipes back into the invisible car.

But my head—it doesn't stop. It overtakes space, installing itself in the emptiness. It fills the car. The car made of chameleons. A lizard (the rearview mirror) flashes briefly into visibility, a red shimmer passing through it, then a green, then a blue. Down among the meadows of my retinas, I am having a picnic by myself.

Why? How did this happen? I never made the conscious decision to give up. To quit space and time and animality. No, something made the decision for me, without my consent or awareness. As if my shadow signed a contract binding to the whole. No, I don't know.

I blame my father.

Do not give up. Fight it. Fight the neutralization, the homogenization of space. Dive into the energy of external phenomena. Find things to do.

I turn on the radio. I sing along. I change the station. I contemplate an advertisement. I slam my fists into the steering wheel. I run the windshield wipers (two long chameleon tails) for no reason. I clean gunk from the cup holders. I organize the glove compartment.

I go for a drive.

The car crashes through the garage wall and into the house, coming to a stop in the living room. There it breaks apart, its reptilian pieces dispersing to become the room, to freeze into the couch and the clock and the television.

In the kitchen, my father is a mass of chameleons, hidden.

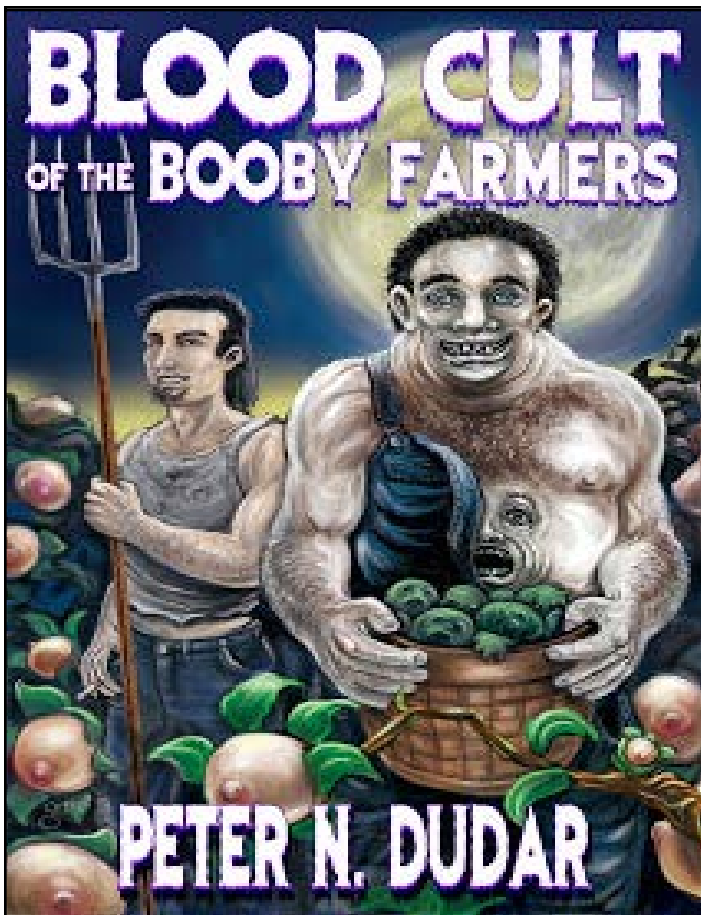
Stacks of paper rain from the ceiling. The taxes.

I do the taxes.

My head fills the room, flowing over the couch and the clock and the television. I dive into the energy of the taxes, vomiting scrawls of ink at random. This is embarrassing. I hate this, hate being this. This is all that my wisdom amounts to. I do the taxes. Disgust. I do the taxes. Camouflage.

I do the taxes.

And then I quit.



## **Blood Cult of the Booby Farmers by Peter Dudar**

### **Review by Jeremy Maddux**

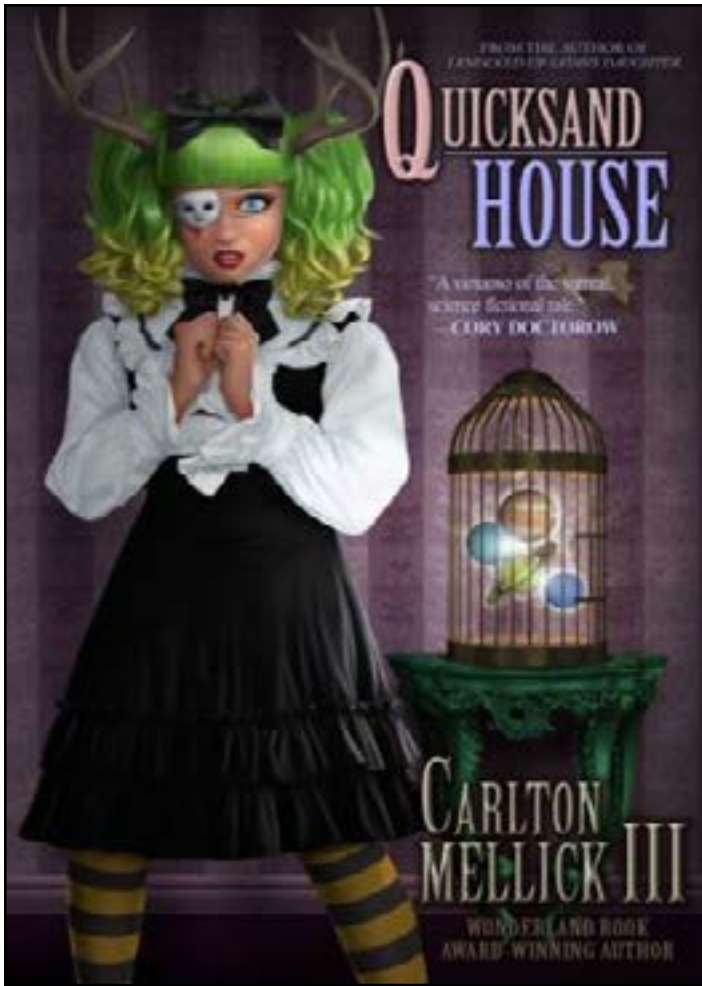
This delightful b movie/exploitation splatter piece comes to us courtesy of Peter Dudar, who is usually accustomed to writing erotica under a pseudonym. It was published with a depraved love by Nick Cato through Novello Publishing, and has garnered more than a little acclaim since its arrival in publishing.

We all remember those Friday and Saturday nights (when we weren't getting laid or into trouble) perched on the couch as we watched *Student Bodies*, *The Horror of Party Beach*, *I Drink Your Blood*, *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*, *Sorority House Massacre* and other decadent reels with titles longer than their running time. That's the vibe Peter Dudar manages to connect with in *Blood Cult of the Booby Farmers*.

Old Lee Tucker and his family of ne'er-dowells and deformed farmland bumpkins are facing the foreclosure of their land by town banker Nelson Gray. It doesn't take long for this arrogant Vice President of Cold Currant Savings and Loan to push his luck and stir them thar boys up.

There's Tobias, Matty and Bubba, the last of which is a face-like growth on Matty's chest. These boys proceed to take matters into their own hands, disposing of Nelson Gray and abducting his pregnant wife. Then the final act fulfills itself as described by the author in his own words, 'The 3 Stooges peppered with rape, torture and murder.'

Strangely enough, I felt zero sympathy for the man who's supposed to be the protagonist, that being Nelson Gray. By the end, you won't be sure who to root for, as Peter Dudar is adept at showing the ruthlessness and prejudices of every character in this book. Also, it's not a story that's supposed to change the world, or even change anyone's mind about a damn thing. It's just supposed to echo a dying era of cinema when nothing was sacred, everything was allowed and there were no organizations or defense leagues reacting with kneejerk outrage to every frame of mindless cult entertainment. Can you remember the last time you saw a movie in the theater that wasn't PG-13? I can. It was called *Blood Cult of the Booby Farmers*.



## Quicksand House Review by Jeremy Maddux

No Bizarro compendium would be complete without at least mentioning the surreal grandeur of Carlton Mellick who, along with Kevin Donihe, is one of the genre's foremost innovators. He's taken us to places in his works we might never have seen otherwise, places we never wanted to see, places we weren't meant to see. Through Carlton's books, we have seen haunted vaginas, werewolf women who enslave mutated McDonaldland employees, vampiric mermaids, obese ninjas, Satan's promiscuous daughter. Mellick's landscapes are nothing if not compelling.

Mellick takes B-movie mystery meat and sandwiches it between slices of subconscious bread, and we can't help but smile at the fact that we just ate up a story about fruit-like tumors that grow on a woman's body.

Knowing all this cannot prepare you for the heart wrenching onslaught of emotions Carlton Mellick's newest effort will bring out in you. As I write this, Quicksand House has been out for less than a week. Going in, I had no clue what it was about, just that the editors and proofreaders who had labored on the touchy tome were emotionally traumatized. In just two days, I sank into the morass that was Quicksand House and didn't want to escape.

Quicksand House focuses on an isolated brother and sister, Tick and Polly, who have spent their entire young lives within the Nursery. They have a nanny who has served as their guardian from inception. They go to school like any child. They eat, sleep, have their routines. But, under no condition are they allowed to roam outside of the nursery in their continent-sized house. The reason for this is the Creepers, who can travel through any dark space and are repelled by light.

Now that Tick and Polly are entering their teens, they begin to get restless. They want to see more of the house. They want to see the parents they've never met. The food machines are the first to go, then a fire engulfs their little sanctuary. They have no choice but to venture into the dark, cavernous rooms of the rest of the house, which may or may not be occupied. It is at this point that the story begins to gather momentum, and it is here that the children's journey will tug at your heart strings, if you have any.

Carlton Mellick said he wrote this story as a response to his childhood fear of his family being taken from him, the uncertainty of being a young human being under someone else's care. What if something were to happen to the person caring for him? How did he wring the very specific storytelling ministrations of Quicksand House out of that very broad worst case scenario? Well, as you can see in the illustrated afterword of the book, we have Minecraft, energy drinks and the Red Lion Hotel.

When Bizarro explodes into the mainstream, and I believe it will emphatically NOT be long now, this book will serve as the zeitgeist, the generational touchstone. You do not want to be one of those people who missed out on reading Quicksand House because it wasn't cool to do so, like Memento or Requiem For a Dream. Because sometimes, we need to have our hearts broken to appreciate our own lives a little more. Enjoy Quicksand House, and thank Carlton Mellick for what he had to go through in order to get this story to us.





# THE BUTT MUNCHERS

BY JUSTIN GRIMBOL

I love it when a girl has a big, dangly pussy. I love a droopy poon. And Tanya's lady flap was super dangly. It was so dangly that as I sucked on it, I actually gagged a little.

We were in the 69 position. She was giving me the toothiest blow job I had ever gotten. I didn't mind though. As long as I had Old Captain Dangles in my face, I was happy.

Ted, her boyfriend, caught us slurping and burping on each other's weird parts. He stomped up, squatted over my face, and tried to stick his flaccid cock in Tanya's ass. I understood where he was coming from. But now I had to pretend to enjoy the toothy blow job, while this dudes anus hovered only inches from my face. I wanted to scream and beg them to let me out from under them. But then I noticed something strange. His asshole was twinkling. At first I thought there was glitter up there. But the light was too strong. I looked closer. The anus expanded, sensing my presence. I pressed my eye up to it, like it was a telescope.

I was amazed by what I saw in there. I had gone my whole life thinking I would never see anything cooler than a naked chick's poon. I had never believed in ghosts, or heaven, or hell or God, or Aslan, any of that. But what I saw that day was undeniable.

Ted's asshole led to another dimension. There was a sky and people and hills and all sorts of crap, well, not poop, but, you know, stuff. The sky there was murky, yet neon green. The ground was black like Coal.

There were a bunch of little versions Teds hanging out. Each one looked like Ted, my buddy. Some of them were female, but they had goatees just like the male Teds, and they were partying hard. A band was playing crappy jam band music.

Is this his soul? I wondered. Does everyone have a bunch of little versions of themselves partying in their

butthole? It didn't matter. Teds butthole had another dimension in it and I thought that was awesome.

The Teds danced and danced. Many of the Teds had gotten naked. I noticed a couple fucking. I giggled. Seeing Ted fuck Ted was hilarious.

One of the Teds brought a female on stage. The band stopped playing music. The crowd got onto their knees and started chanting: "Ted! Ted! Ted! Ted!" It looked like they were preparing to sacrifice her.

I saw a big red Ted demon in the sky. The guys had gnarly horns on his head and goatee made of tentacles. Its dong was like fire hose. It flew down. The chanting got louder. The female Ted tried to get off the altar. Other Teds held her down. She screamed. Demon Ted climbed on top of her and shoved a crap-ton of his dick in her. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Teds anus world knew how to party!

The little anal Teds kept chanting as the demon boinked the tiny female Ted. Once the demon was done, it flew off. The chanting stopped.

Female Ted spread her legs and all the other Teds lined up. They had bowls. Semen gushed out of the woman's gaping poon. They took turns pouring the demon spunk their bowls.

Once they all had a bowl of demon jizz, they started lapping up the demon cum. Their bodies began to change. They shook and things grew out of them. One dude exploded. Another grew wings. They were screaming.

"What the fuck are you doing down there," Tanya yelled.

Ted stood up and his little world was taken away from me. I was back at the party, and surrounded by naked people.

"Chill out," Ted said to his girlfriend. "I was just trying out some anal."

"You know I'm not into that."

"Well, you seem into sucking on that fat guys cock-a-

saurous.”

“We’re at an orgy, Ted. Sucking dick is what I do at orgies.”

“Hey, calm down. I don’t care what gross, sweaty little dick you suck on. You’re the one getting all bent out of shape over taking a little dick in the ass. You can suck that chunky dude’s nob all you want. See if I care.”

I looked up her. She could tell what I was thinking just by the pathetic look in my eyes.

“You’re going to have to finish with some other chick,” she said. “My jaw hurts.”

She stomped off to the kitchen and poured a bowl of cereal. I thought about the weird stuff I just saw up in Teds butt hole. I looked at the dude. I was blown away by how casual he was acting. He had no idea that he had a hundred little versions of himself in his asshole.

Ted walked up to my girlfriend, Loni. She smiled at him. He smiled back.

“Go ahead, touch it,” he told her.

She took his dick, and put it in her mouth. She sucked on it until it got hard. He grabbed her hair and face fucked her. She made a gagging noise. It sounded goofy, but kinda sexy.

A girl walked by and I grabbed her and started fondling on her boobies, and her poon area. Her poon was not as dangly as I liked, but it tasted good. I ate her out until she came. Then it was my turn, and I told her so. But she wouldn’t return the favor. Cumming made her tired. She ended up passing out.

I looked around for another girl, but everyone was occupied.

Ted had my girlfriend on all fours and was humping away, going fast as he could. I saw him make an orgasm face. He spunked, then pulled out, got up and went to the couch and started rolling a joint. My girlfriend stayed there for a bit, not knowing what hit her.

“Hey baby,” I said.

She crawled over to me. We kissed. I tickled her. She laughed.

“Look at your little boner,” she said.

She put my dick in her mouth. It felt good to get a BJ from my old lady. After fucking around with so many weird chicks, it felt good to be with someone familiar. It was like drinking hot chocolate after playing out in the snow all day.

We got in 69 position. She had a real stinky poon, which I loved. I licked it a little. I noticed that green

light was coming out of her poon. It was just like the light in Ted’s asshole. I opened her pussy up a little and put my eye up to it.

There were hundreds of little monsters in her poon. I assumed they had come from Ted’s anal dimension. He must have squirted the monsters into her woman cave with his dick. One of the monsters had a guitar and was playing the same kind of shitty jam band music I heard come out of his anus. Yes, these were definitely Ted’s monsters.

The little beasts were rowdy. I couldn’t tell if they were partying, or fucking, or fighting, or doing all these things at the same time. Either way, they were acting nuts. One of them was smoking a joint. That one was definitely partying. Well, it was partying until another one of Ted’s monsters cut him in half with a crab claw. It was brutal. They were going apeshit. There was this one monster with a cock that looked like a shark. I saw it fuck this other monster right in the ass. Blood splattered everywhere. But the monster with the big butt loved it. The thing kept begging for more.

Another monster flew down and started fucking the guy with the shark cock in the ear. It shot jizz into the dude’s ear until his exploded. The dudes head exploded! He had no head! But he didn’t die. He just kept fucking that other monster in the butt with his shark dick. That’s how hard these monsters liked to party.

“What are you doing down there?” Loni asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

I thought about the little versions of Teds, and how they drank the demon spunk and changed into monsters.

“Hey, Loni,” I said. “I got an idea.”

I told her to sit on the couch, but to not let any of Ted’s semen spill out of her. I ran to the kitchen and found a bunch of bowls.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Ted asked.

“Just watch,” I said.

I had my girlfriend squat. Chunky poured fell out of her. I caught it in one of the bowls. The jizz continued to pour out.

“Gnarly,” one girl yelled.

“Did I do that? Is that all mine?” Ted asked.

I continued filling the bowls with cum. The rest of the swingers stood around and watched. They looked horrified and grossed out, but also fascinated.

I gave them each a bowl.

“What the fuck dude?” one kid said.

"Yea," Ted said. "What up with the jizz bowls?"

"Just watch," I said.

I drank the jizz out of my bowl. It tasted like pool water flavored yogurt.

"Holy shit!" Ted yelled.

His girlfriend started clapping and cheering me on.

"This is awesome!" she yelled.

As soon as the jizz hit my stomach I began to change.

I saw my hand grow. My skin became grey and scaly.

Then I blacked out. All I could see was the darkness for a bit. A green face lit up in the darkness. It was my face. "Later bro," it said. "Gotta go now. Enjoy being a monster."

Eventually I came to and I saw everyone screaming.

Well, everyone except Loni and Tanya. They must have drunk the jizz.

All three of us had turned into monsters. It was awesome. I was the leader, 'cause I was the biggest. I was fat, just like my normal self. But fat monsters are cool. Chick monsters think fat monsters are sexy. My beard was fleshy jelly fish tentacles, and when I looked in the mirror I had no eyes. I had no eyes, but I could still see. How cool is that?

Loni had the same body only it was bigger and she had a tail and her face looked like a frog's. I liked her big mouth. I kissed her, and her tongue shot all the way through my body and out my butthole.

Tanya had a gator face that was all bloody 'cause she had just killed her boyfriend, Ted, and then eaten him. She also had six arms...a dick. My girlfriend saw this weird female lizard cock and got excited. She barfed green goo onto it, and started licking it off. Tanya stared laughing with excitement.

All the other kids got freaked out. They screamed and cried and ran out of the apartment. Most of them escaped. It didn't matter. I wasn't the kind of monster that liked to kill things. I was the kind of monster that liked to fuck.

But we needed more monsters. I grabbed a couple more kids and forced them to drink the jizz. One transformed into a bat creature. The other transformed into a giant worm.

Loni took the worm and shoved him up my ass.

It burned at first. I got so excited my sphincter contracted. It cut the worm in two. Loni pulled the rest of it out. That was the best part. It felt even better than shitting.

The Bat flew onto my face. I tried to pull him off but I couldn't. It had tentacles that wrapped around my

head. It's cock shit jizz into my face. It tasted really sweet. I liked it. But I was also worried that my face might explode. Luckily, when I barfed, the bat shot off my face and onto the wall. The thing broke open like an egg.

We were right back to having only three monsters. All the other kids had already escaped. I thought about going through the apartment building and grabbing some random people. But I was too horny. I needed to fuck and get fucked. Also, we didn't have any jizz left. And just fucking some normal human seemed boring.

Loni started sucking on Tanya's lizard cock again. I bent over and spread my monster girlfriend's giant ass cheeks apart. My beard tentacles felt around.

They were like little tongues. There was just so much ass. There was so much stinky/tasty stuff. It seemed endless. I stuck my head in as far as I could. Finally, I found her anus. I put my eye up to it. I looked in. It was even better than Ted's anus. She had a much cooler looking dimension in her butt. The sky had stars in it. Long green grass covered rolling hills. And there were unicorns. There were hundreds of unicorns. They were all fucking and shooting rainbows out their dick and their assholes. It looked so magical. I wanted to be there.

I pulled my head out the giant butt cave, and told Tanya to grab my ankles and start shoving me into Loni's butt, like I was giant dildo.

At first it seemed impossible. I just couldn't fit in there. Then my one of my arms ripped off and the blood worked as lube. Tanya gave me one hard push and I flew into the Unicorn dimension.

I was so happy. As soon as I landed, I ran at the unicorns, ready to fuck. They didn't like me though and they ran away. I chased after them but they were too fast. The clouds were dark purple and everything around me was desolate and lonely. I called out for help. The girls couldn't hear me. I was trapped in my girlfriend butthole.

I've been living in here for years, eating my own boogers for food. It sucks. It's the suckiest thing ever.



# i've got the worry

## by tony rauch

"You've got the worry," the nurse looks down on me with a grim expression.

"I've got the worry?" I repeat, but just to myself.

"I've got the worry," I sigh.

"Tell me about that," the doctor walks over to my bed.

I'm lying in a hospital bed and feeling lousy. "I don't know, I guess I just sort of feel lousy about everything," I shrug and turn away. "Lousy," I shake my head, "... "Just ... Just lousy."

"Do you feel sick at all?" the doctor asks in a somber tone, looking down at the clipboard she is holding, "Are you in distress?"

"Distress?" I look up, surprised. I certainly hope I didn't look like I was in distress. "Ah. No. Not in distress. Not sick, I'm ... I'm just afraid of everything, that's all. Everything's so uncertain, so up-in-the-air," I exhale in exasperation. "I'm just ... scared."

"If things were more settled in your own mind, do you think you'd feel better?" the doctor looks down at me. She wears a concerned furrow on her brow.

I swallow hard, "I don't know. ... Maybe," I whisper. "I'm just so afraid. I'm afraid of everything. That's all I feel - just worry and concern. ... Ambivalence. ... I'm scared. I'm afraid. My stomach hurts. ... I know it doesn't make sense, but that's all I feel. Just worry. ... I've ... I've got the worry. ..." I trail off, as if just thinking out loud.

The nurse looks over to the doctor, "It's been going around," she says. "This is not uncommon unfortunately. Not lately anyway."

My mother is sitting on a chair in the back. She looks at the doctor. "Is there anything you can do to make her more comfortable? Calm her?"

"No, ma'am. She's too young for medication. We don't like pumping kids full of antidepressants any longer," the doctor shakes her head.

"I'm not depressed," I wheeze, "I'm just scared, that's all. I'm uncomfortable for no reason at all, really. Really super concerned is what I am."

"Generalized Anxiety Disorder," nods the nurse. "I don't think medication will do here. Not in a case this severe."

"Eemmm, I don't think so," the doctor swallows. "This doesn't look like G-A-D. I think this is the other thing, that fear thing that's been going around."

"What fear thing?" my mother asks.

"Something that's been going around," the nurse turns to my mother, "Like the flu, but without the vomiting. Just a lot of worrying, a lot of fear."

"Has your daughter been pacing?" the doctor asks my mother, "Wringing her hands? Hiding under her covers? Under the bed? In her closet? ..."

"Has she been hiding behind the drapes, peeking out on it all?" the nurse asks.

"Ah, well, I don't rightly know," my mother searches.

"I'm going to show you a series of pictures now, and we'd like you to tell us how you feel about each image. Is that alright with you?" the doctor tries to smile, but it is a small, forced smile, like she doesn't know what to do

"I guess," I mutter, still looking away, off to the side, away from the window.

"OK now, tell me how you feel about this one," the doctor softens her voice.

I swallow and look over with just my eyes.

The doctor holds up a color photo of a butterfly. The image is the size of a piece of paper. "Now, if you can, tell us how you feel," she whispers and nods, prodding me on.

"I feel scared," I turn away. "It makes me feel scared."

The doctor turns to show the picture to my mother.

"It's only a butterfly, dear," my mother says to me.

"Is it trust issues, doctor?" the nurse asks. "Maybe it's stress. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?"

"No. I don't think so," my mother utters. "She just crawled into bed one day and didn't want to get out."

"I'm afraid," I sigh. "Like I told you. . . I'm just scared. Scared of everything."

"Do you feel overwhelmed? Overwhelmed by life?" my mom asks.

"Nnnnooooouggghhhh," I groan. "We've been over this," I whine.

"If you go after what you're afraid of, or if you do or try what you're afraid of, that action should get you more comfortable with the situation and eventually your fear should subside. Though it may take some time, that time will be worth the investment," the nurse chimes in. "The goal is to lessen the fear, to figure out how to lessen the fear."

"How 'bout this one?" the doctor holds up another image.

I move my eyes over to look at it. It's a photo of a fluffy kitten.

"How does this make you feel? Safe? Overwhelmed?" the doctor clears her throat.

"Scared. . . Just scared," I sigh.

"How 'bout this one," the doctor holds up a picture of a man in a dark suit in an alley. The man has on a dad hat and sunglasses.

"No. Not scared. . . Well, scared still, but not any more scared than before."

"Why did you say: 'not scared'?" the doctor asks.

"I don't know. Maybe because he has on a funny hat," I close my eyes.

"The hat isn't scary?" the doctor asks.

"Not scary. But I'm still scared. Just as scared as before," I report.

"We'll talk more about this later. You just get some rest, alright?" the doctor nods.

I nod, my eyes still closed. "I'm not tired, really. . . I'm . . . I'm more weary. Weary of things. Of everything. Every single thing. . . Just weary."

"We'll let you rest," the nurse whispers.

And they all leave.

I pull the covers up over my head and squirm into a ball, trying to become a smaller target.

Later, a man comes in. He looks like a custodian, all dressed in custodian garb - the dark green clothes and all. He looks around as if something is misplaced.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" I peek out from the covers, wide awake and bored.

"The elephant," he crouches and looks about. "The hospital's elephant. Well, one of 'em. We have several. . . One got away."

"I'm afraid," I mention.

"Of me? Or of elephants?"

"Of everything," I exhale. "I'm just scared," I shake my head.

"That's stupid," the custodian is down on all fours now, checking things out, looking under things. "Well, I mean, it's OK to be afraid of some things, open elevator shafts, strangers in dark alleys, fire, yellow snow. . . That kind of stuff."

"I guess," I close my eyes.

"Life is an adventure, like the monkey bars or the big slide or something. Lots of new stuff around: New kids your own age, new subjects in school. You afraid of any of those?"

"I'm just afraid. I think I'm afraid of everything. Just afraid in general," I report.

"Hope you're not scared of elephants," the man says, looking around.

"Is it a big one?" I ask.

"Eemmm, no. They're small. All our elephants here



are small ones. Like the size of a dog,” he shuffles, bending and searching, his eyes darting, “The small ones cost less to feed. They eat much less. . . . And take up less space, I guess.”

“There’s lots of different sizes of dogs,” I inform.

“Yes there are. And there’s lots of different sizes of elephants too,” he answers.

“Hmm, you’re funny,” I close my eyes.

“If I’m funny, what are you then?” he asks as he looks around.

“I’m scared,” I respond.

“Do you have brain monsters?” he asks.

“What’re those?”

“You know, they’re monsters that are in your brain. They’re stuck in there. Maybe lost or trapped or something. They can’t get out. Or robots. Maybe there’s some robots running around loose up there. Maybe even just one. Just one lost robot. . . . Poor robot.”

“Emm, maybe,” I think about this for a moment, “Well, probably not, I guess. . . . No. No brain monsters or robots. Probably nothing like that,” I sigh.

“Monkeys? What about monkeys? Maybe one got loose up in there?”

I sigh heavily.

“Ok, maybe it’s not monkeys. . . . Maybe one of the elephants . . . Oh, that would be heavy. A small elephant. Stuck in your mind, in your imagination. Just lodged in there, just wedged in there like a great big poop that you just can’t seem to get out. . . . Just . . . Just takin’ up a whole lotta space in there, cloggin’ things up a might.”

“Emm, no,” I draw up a deep breath, “I don’t think it’s anything like that. . . . It’s more of an over-all thing. Not just in my mind. . . . Just fear. Just worry. Concern. But not about anything specific. Fear about everything. All of it. . . . A general, all-around thing.”

“About everything all as a whole? As a complete whole?” he stops and looks over at me.

“I don’t know really. Something like that. Maybe. I can’t figure it out,” I shake my head, “Can’t seem to shake it.”

“You gotta learn to let go of your inhibitions, your preconceptions, your fears. Let go of your past. Some people go around wearing them like protective armor. But it just weighs them down,” he says.

“Well, sure. That’s easy. Thanks. . . . I’m better now . . . Gee, that was fast. What took you so long to get here? I’m better now. Thanks. How much do we owe you?” I sigh, “What, is this a hospital of nitwits?”

“Like this,” he drops his pants and shuffles around in his underwear. He is wearing large pink boxer shorts with big, lime green elephants printed on them. He shimmies around in a slight dance. He shuffles over to the window and hops up on the window sill and spins around, then hops down. He looks at the wall, thinking. “One time I was afraid I was going to slip into another dimension. . . . Everyone I know would be there, but they’d be different, you know. . . . I don’t care for change. . . . No sir. . . .”

“I’m afraid of going to school,” I swallow. . . . “Afraid I’ll mess up. Make a mistake.”

“How ever will you learn then? That’s one of the best ways to learn,” the man nods his head to himself, thinking.

“I’m afraid of the clouds,” I sign.

“I’m afraid of getting old. . . . Not of dying, but of dying alone,” the man nods, “Or never meeting the right person to settle down with. . . . That’s a big one for me.”

“Oh,” I pull the covers up over my head again and squish into a ball, “I don’t think about that one.”

“And of living a clichéd, cookie-cutter, formula life,” the man continues, “. . . . A life that’s all planned out. . . . No surprises.”

“I’m afraid of eating bean sprouts,” I say, “That they’ll grow inside of me.”

“Maybe in the future, people won’t be afraid,” the man wonders, “. . . . Maybe they’ll be brave. . . . Have courage.”

“Maybe they’ll be stupid,” I sigh.

“No fear, Ms. Shakey,” the man spins around, shuffling to the window with his pants around his ankles.

I pull the covers down and watch him, “I’m not shaking or shivering,” I report.

"No fear, little scaredy cat," the man shuffles over to the window and hops up on the window sill again and then hops right out.

I listen for a moment. I think I hear a rustle. Maybe he grabbed a branch and swung down to the ground.

Then a lady comes rushing into the room. "Did you see a man dressed as a janitor?" she asks, looking around.

But my eyes are closed now. "He left," I say. "He's not here anymore. He was here. But now he's not."

"Are you alright?"

"You know, now that you mention it, I do feel a little better for some reason. Maybe it won't last, but I do feel a tad better." I hear the lady rush out, back into the hall. "I do. I feel a little better," I admit to myself. Maybe it's because that janitor guy is out. Out and about. Free. Unafraid. Uninhibited. At least one of us is free from the worry. At least one of us made it out.





# ABORTED MOTHER

## BY MARK SLADE

Mother looked at her enlarged hands, thinking how much they resembled pot holders. She sat on the couch, her thin framed body was outlined by the soft glowing hue of the TV. The sound was ear-piercing, some man screaming in Japanese. She felt strange, everything was in a haze now. She reached into a brown paper bag and pulled out another hypodermic needle filled with puss and blood. She bit off one end and the dark brownish red liquid oozed out of her mouth.

"Take it easy," Baby said from his dirty crib. His large black milky eyes would cross every time he spoke. "You don't want to overdose." He swished around in his wet diaper. He was surrounded by broken wooden soldiers, stuffed animals without limbs, plastic lawn flamingos with razor blades embedded into their bodies.

"Don't lecture me," Mother said coolly. Her large lips twisted up as if she'd been eating lemons. "I didn't ask for you to come into my world."

"Never the less," Baby retorted, catching a Japanese wasp between his thumb and forefinger. "I am here. What good would you be to me if you were not here to fight off the wolves?" Baby pulled the stinger from the wasp and swallowed him whole. He closed his eyes and felt the bee go all the way down to his tummy.

Mother heard the howls of the wolves outside. They were distant, maybe a few miles off. They would be scratching on the front door tonight, whispering their evil Nazi propaganda to her baby. She tugged at her stringy blond hair. "They will never get in," Mother said. "Never."

Later, there was a knock at the front door. Mother was passed out, lying face first on the puke covered carpet. The knock was persistent and it woke Baby up. He tried calling out to Mother, but she was too far gone in the dream country. Baby decided to climb out of his crib. He crawled to the couch and slowly pulled itself up on the arm. To reach the door knob he had to climb on top of the back of the couch.

Baby turned the door knob with all the strength his little hand could muster. The door creaked open. A tall well-

dressed man in a black suit appeared. He had a permanent smile drawn on a pasty white face and two eight balls for eyes.

"Yes?" Baby said to the stranger.

"I am here to make your day, sir," The stranger said. His mouth never moved. His voice was robotic, as if he were a doll and someone pulled the cord attached to his back. "What I have in my suitcase can make a life decision for you, my good man. Good or bad, usually for the good!" A laugh sputtered and the eight balls in his head jumped up and down.

"I'm really rather busy," Baby told the stranger. "As you can see I have a situation with Mother."

"I can help you with that.....situation." The stranger pushed his way through the door and laid his weather-beaten suitcase on the coffee table.

"Well...no...please..." Baby pleaded. "We're fine here----"

"It doesn't look fine to me," The stranger hissed. He turned his clockwork neck slightly and his head swiveled around completely, stopping momentarily to scout the messy house. "Hmmm...do you even get to eat regular meals?"

Baby climbed down from the couch. He crawled over top of half-eaten puss filled syringes, empty candy bar wrappers and passed Mother, who was lost in dreamland, her mouth open, drooling on the carpet. The stranger bent down on one knee. "You don't have to say anything, little man. I see this all the time. She says she is going out to buy food and supplies, comes back with MacDonald's, candy and enough syringes to make William Burroughs come in his pants."

Baby looked over at Mother. "She is very loving in her own way, I suppose."

"Where is your father, son?" The stranger touched Baby briefly on his tiny shoulder, then withdrew quickly.

"He was eaten by the wolves. He went out late at night to score. A pack of wolves tore him apart and ate his insides."



"How tragic. You have to be careful of those nasty beasts." The stranger said. The stranger stood. "That is why you need help with life decisions." He opened the briefcase and extracted a large bottle of brown gooey liquid. "This will do the trick. Trust me."

Baby really did want a new Mother. He loved Mother, but she couldn't keep her promises. She really couldn't keep him safe from the wolves out there.

In the distance a wolf howled. Baby shivered. The stranger shook his clockwork head slowly.

"Tsk, tsks," The stranger said. "It sounds as if they are getting closer."

Baby swallowed hard. "What do you get if I accept this gift from you?"

"Ahhhh...a smart child I see." The stranger's eight balls danced in his eye socket as a growl of laughter cut loose from throat. "I get your old Mother. Fair enough? A new and better, more caring Mother for a Mother that is better left for the Collectors."

Baby gasped. The Collectors were nothing but scourges digging in garbage dumps for bodies piled in large wastelands. They ravage the dead for meals for the people who live underground, the rich who could afford to take all of their possessions and leave the top level after the Apocalypse came and destroyed the world.

"The Scourges pay well, then?" Baby placed his thumb in his mouth, began to suck softly.

The wolves could be heard outside the door, scratching, pushing against it with their bodies, whining and growling.

Baby snatched the bottle from the stranger. He snapped off the cap and guzzled down the thick brown liquid. The stranger watched with much impatience, even lifting an encouraging hand.

"Drink, drink, drink it all down....yes." The stranger hissed.

Baby felt strange. His stomach began to swell. Baby fell to his knees and immediately vomited out the small amount of contents from his stomach. He wiped the yellow bile from his lips with a hand. Baby looked up and saw the stranger open the front door.

"No..." Baby tried to scream, but his throat was too raw. Baby ran and hid behind his crib. He covered his eyes with his hands.

Six gray wolves with fiery red eyes burst in. they gathered around Mother. They took turns tearing at her, sharp fangs ripping flesh from her face, hands and legs. Mother screamed, prayed to God for help. Two wolves bit hard into an ankle each. They dragged out of the house and

into dark night. Their brothers went out the door as well, stopped at the doorstep and called out for all to hear, they had a new body for the landfill.

Baby stepped out from behind the crib. He saw the puddle of dark red blood the wolves left behind. Baby's head felt heavier than usual. His eyes rolled in the back of his head. In a split second, Baby was passed out on the floor.

Baby awoke two days later. His eyes fluttered, a cloud of smoke dispersed. He realized he lying on the kitchen table, the stranger standing in front of him.

"What's going on?" Baby asked, still a bit groggy.

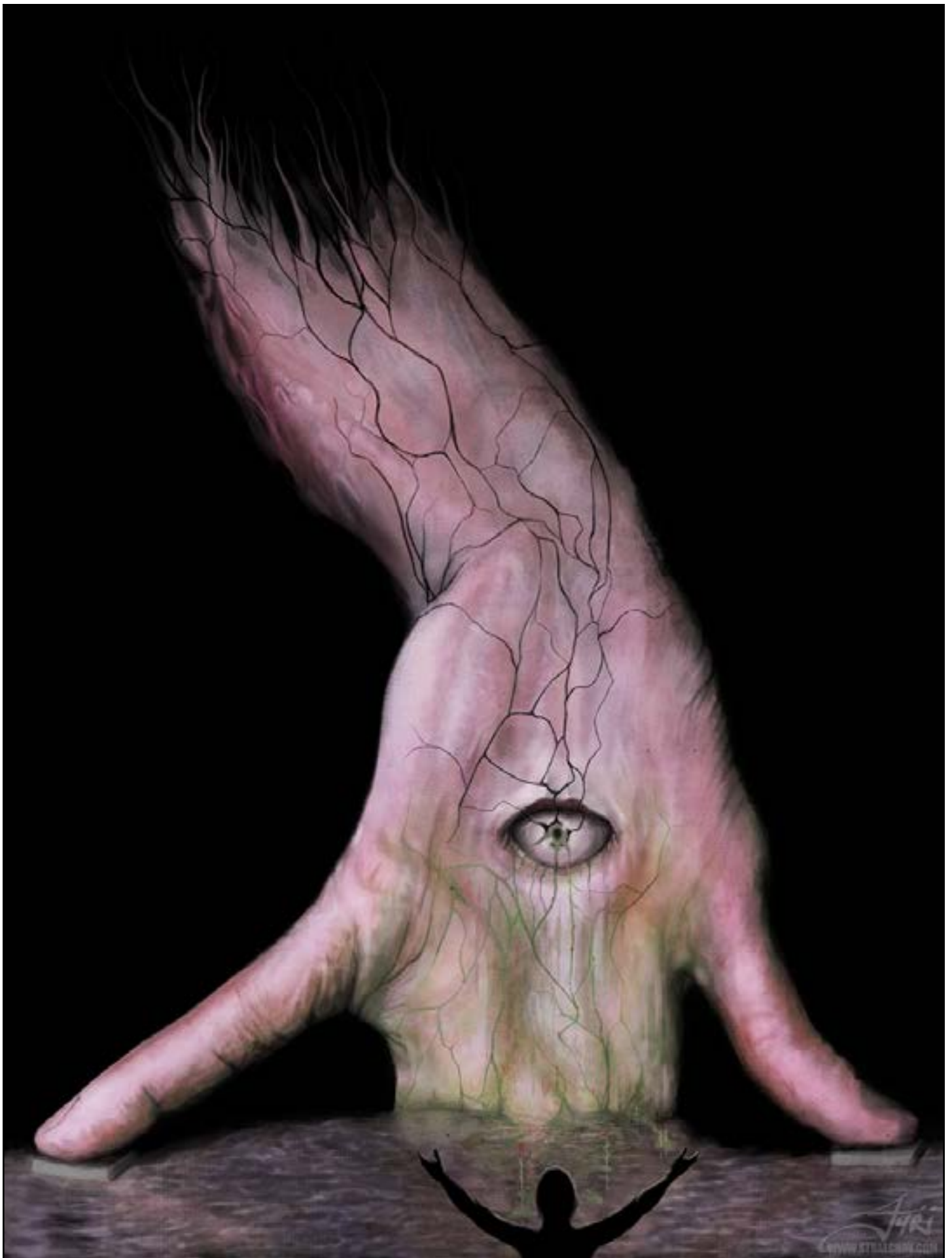
The stranger took from his black coat a kitchen knife. "It is time," The stranger said.

"Time? Time for what?" Baby tried to pull his arm up, but couldn't. Both arms were strapped down by leather cuffs fastened to chains that were attached to the table.

"For you to give birth to your new Mother."



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# UN HOMME EXTRAORDINAIRE

## by Garrett Cook

A naked man is tumbling down an escalator face first, he hits a stair, bounces, hits a stair, bounces, hits a stair, bounces. There is a look of relief on his face when his head finally hits the bottom, buttocks in the air, feet on the third to last stair, face on the floor, he does not realize that he is in the rare position where his penis is likely to become caught in the machinery. And it does. The escalator tugs on it. Grinds it. He tries to rise, tries to extricate himself from this horrific trap, to pull against it, but it just makes it worse. The only way he can escape is to let the escalator have what it wants. His face is bruised, his head smashed, his testicles and pelvis covered in what looks like pulled pork. He staggers forward three steps, calls for help, collapses, dies.

A woman at the top of the escalator in a pristine ermine coat and a matching ermine hat overcomes the paralytic shock of witnessing a naked man pushed down an escalator and gelded by it and opens her mouth to scream. Only a choking sound comes out. A splash of red stains the ermine coat. She clutches her injured throat, pulls her head back, trying to once more utter the scream. It is just a gurgling noise. She dies. And the man who pushed the naked man down the escalator, the man who shot her in the throat keeps walking.

The man is smartly dressed in a blue Italian suit with a matching blue fedora. His shoes are black as black can be. As he walks out of the mall, he lights a Gitane, although smoking is prohibited. If anyone protests, he will shoot them. He has gotten into a brutal and sociopathic frame of mind and will not get out of it until he is outside in his Renault. Nobody protests. A cute blonde, thigh high go-go boots, checkered minidress trimmed with white fur emerald eyes asks him if he has a light. He does indeed have a light for the cute blonde. He knows that she, like himself is unlikely to get reprimanded for smoking in the mall. At another time in his life, he would have asked for her phone number or invited her out to dinner. He has places to go and a girl to see. This girl does not wear

checkered minidresses with white fur trim. She wears men's shirts, often his shirts and she wears them, as most women accustomed to men's shirts do, better than any man, including the man that wears them, which is most often him.

He goes to his Renault in the parking lot, finds a briefcase on the driver's seat. He does not need to open it. He knows that it contains one million dollars for killing the woman in the ermine coat. He does not for a moment register excitement. He does not think "Wow, a million dollars! What could I buy with a million dollars?" he thinks "Good, I am on schedule. I will be twelve minutes late for lunch." If he is twelve minutes late for lunch, she will not have left yet, but she will be under the impression that perhaps he is not coming. Her brown eyes will grow wide, her pink, suggestive lips will quiver. He shows up to the restaurant, exactly twelve minutes late.

Her brown eyes have grown wide, her shiny, suggestive lips are quivering. He sits down. He does not apologize for his lateness. He does however, take off his hat, place it on the chair next to him and give her a smile. A short but potent halfsmile, revealing no teeth. Although he is proud of his teeth he does not show them. Fixation upon a power object? Social gaming? Fear of intimacy? It could be any of these. She has thought at different times that all of these were possible. She is nonetheless still grateful for his smile. She returns the smile with one of her own, completely willing to show her teeth, although he calculates that this may be one of those acts of passive aggression that women are so prone to. This malicious speculation ceases when he sees how good she looks in the white silk shirt she is wearing, a shirt she gave him for his birthday.

"How was your day?" she asks.

The question hangs in the air because the waiter arrives before he can answer it.

"Scotch," he tells the waiter, "no ice."

"Orangina," she tells the waiter, "plenty of ice."

The waiter nods.

"I will be back shortly."

He is surprised to find the waiter is touching his hand. The waiter looks in his eyes, face overcome by a strange melancholia.

"I promise."

The waiter leaves. The two feel a chill in his absence and hope that he returns in all possible haste. What will become of them if he does not? For one thing, they will be thirsty, but that, that's the least of it. He lets out a sigh. It's uncommon for him to let anything out. His face is a wall occasionally graffiti tagged with tenderness washed away by his inner constabulary. She scans his illegible blue eyes for answers. She can find anagrams for fear, but that is the most. And his body language shows signs of being unsettled by the waiter touching his hand and promising to return.

"So, you didn't tell me about your day."

"It was fine."

"It's funny," she says, reaching across the table to steal the Gitanes from his jacket pocket, "you always seem to be fine." She lights one.

"There are some men who encounter tragedy. There are others that live their lives so they do not." He takes back the pack of Gitanes. Takes one out. Lights it.

"So you are telling me that you're always fine because you have decided never to be afflicted by tragedy?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. I have decided not to encounter it. Tragedy and I simply do not meet."

"That sounds like you're tempting fate." She takes a deep drag of her cigarette, maybe concerned by what he's saying but glad to see him saying so much.

"No."

"Whatever you do, I want you to stop doing it."

"I don't know if I can."

She puts out her cigarette.

"I don't know if I can take that for an answer."

He nods.

"Okay."

She leans in.

"Do you mean that you'll stop doing what you do?"

He thinks about the million dollars. He looks for reasons for which he would need another million dollars. He finds none. His million dollars will be sufficient.

"Yes. I'll stop."

Her eyes tear up.

"I love you."

He nods. He halfsmiles. It's a gift. And then they're quiet. He sits and lives with the weight of his decision. She dreams of the future they'll have together. They wait around for the waiter. The waiter does not return. He's haunted by the waiter not keeping his promise. She doesn't seem to notice. He's grateful for this. They leave, surprised that neither of them are hungry.

Cool satin sheets rustle. Underneath the two of them make love vigorously. He is no longer thinking about the waiter or the million dollars. He is only thinking about being under these cool white sheets every night with her skin pressed against his. He's more than willing to stop pushing people down escalators or shooting them in the neck. They finish making love. They talk in bed for hours. About more or less nothing. Her far more than him. He's more of a listener. They fall asleep.

He awakens in the middle of the night. He is wrinkled. He weighs three hundred pounds. He has no teeth. He can tell somehow that he is impotent. His heart leaps, bounds, pounds, threatens to escape his chest. He puts his hand on his potbelly. He stifles tears, afraid of waking her to see what he has become. The telephone rings once. He picks it up. Cringes when he hears the voice on the other end.

"It has come to my attention that you wish to retire. This cannot be. Remember what you get from us. Do you really want to end up this way?"

"No."

He hangs up the phone. His body is the way it was again. Young, virile, sleek and strong. He is as cool as



they come. Without them, he would be like everyone else, waiting around to get old, fat and insignificant, to lose his beautiful teeth. Contemplating what he had become makes him think about words. Morality is but one cruciform letter away from mortality. You begin with something beautiful, but then it slips in, tall with arms outstretched for you, it gives birth to the cross you have to bear before you sacrifice yourself to nature and the processes of decay. To be what he was, was to be outside of nature, too cool to even imagine getting old and fat and toothless. He dresses in his blue suit with his blue fedora and gets in the Renault. There is a manila envelope on the driver's seat.

Inside the manila envelope is the photograph of a five year old girl. Blonde hair, pig tails, pink dress, cute upturned nose, eyes as blue as his own but in them, but they are pools of vulnerability shining with trust. It displeases him to see this. He had told his employers, including the boss whom he had only spoken to on the telephone that he did not kill children and never wished to. The boss it seems, did not care much about his objections. He contemplates doubting his commitment to this job. He feels a hair graying as he does. The boss has gotten the point across just fine. To refuse is to grow old, to lose his cool, the cool the girl fell in love with him. Perhaps there would be some way for him to convince the boss to let him out of his contract after the girl was dead. He chooses to believe there will be. There must be a way out.

This little girl will be at the mall so he goes to the mall and he waits behind a fern and he watches the people going by. Elegant ladies with ocelots on chains, gentlemen in charcoal grey suits flipping coins hundreds of times, groups of old ladies in tuxedos, top hats, sunglasses and spats, bands of children forming to scream as loud as they can for no good reason. Everyone in this mall is cool in their own way. This is the coolest of malls, so of course, this is where they send him to perform the thefts and murders he has had to perform.

The pigtailed blonde blue-eyed vulnerable girl who he is to kill is walking alone. This is unusual. Shouldn't she be with her mother? Her father? Could it be that she is an orphan? He never knew his mother and father and lived his life feeling as if he sprang forth from chaos like a planet. He points his gun at his fellow orphan, but his hands shake. He cannot do this. This is not a cool thing to do. He holsters his gun. The girl looks directly at him as though she could see through the fern. Seemingly from thin air, she produces a gun. She shoots him in the arm.

He turns tail and flees. She pursues, running after him and shooting. He is fast and knows the mall, knows how to weave around ferns and trashcans and old ladies in tuxedos to seek fire cover from the malevolent child that has made it her mission to terminate her would be assassin. Is she just a test of his commitment? An operative installed to terminate him if he showed reluctance or is she actually a threat to his enigmatic boss and fellow criminals? He could turn around and return fire, but he does not. He needs to get to the Renault, he needs to get home. He needs to get his million dollars and flee, someplace where his employers cannot possibly find him and take back the rewards he's been granted for his years of loyal service.

He reaches the parking lot, he reaches the Renault. He is lucky to have gotten to the car without being shot again. No, it is not luck. It is skill, it is cool. He is too cool to be shot by the child he refused to shoot. He drives off, expecting her to get into a car and drive after him, firing out the window, but this does not happen since she is a little girl and cannot drive. He's very grateful for that. But that, he knows, is the last bit of good news that will come his way for awhile. Things are about to get tough. He parks on the street outside his apartment building, expecting the worst.

He opens the door, squeezes off a shot before he can step inside. The man in a beige trenchcoat who had planned on shooting him when he walked through the door dies. He rifles through the corpse's pockets finding a wallet, which of course contains a police badge. The grasping tendrils of this sinister organization reach far and wide and of course have penetrated the constabulary. He fires again, this time pointing his gun upwards. A second cop's corpse tumbles down the stairs. There is no ambushing someone like him. Unless you're a little girl in a mall in broad daylight.

He runs up the stairs to reach his apartment. He unlocks the door. Pockets his key. Opens the door, fires his gun. Blood spatters from the head of the crooked cop lying in ambush. There is no ambushing an extraordinary man like him. He is not even surprised by the note on the coffee table saying that his love has been taken. He is not surprised by where they wish him to go. He has known others in the organization have ended up at this place when they disappoint the boss. It is where men must go to choose between begging, bargaining or death. He is far too cool to beg so must select between the other two options.

The restaurant is brightly lit, walls covered in whimsical bric-a-brac. Loud children run up and down the aisles screaming and shouting. A fat man wearing a fez is tapping his fingers loudly on a table. Even through the din of screaming kids, it sounds loud. He knows that this fat man is the operative he is supposed to meet. He sits down across from the fat man. Says nothing. The fat man says nothing. A waiter, the same waiter that had disappeared at lunch the previous day comes to the table.

“Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?”

“Yes,” says the fat man, “we will each have a rum and coke.”

“Very good,” says the waiter, with a bow.

“And waiter,” the fat man adds, eyes burning with consequence, “it is this man’s birthday.”

The waiter nods.

“Oui, monsieur.”

“You will not forget?”

“Non, monsieur.”

“Very good.”

As the waiter, walks off, he whispers in his ear.

“I told you I’d be back.”

It gives him little consolation, which is sort of strange, since the waiter’s departure had caused such violent anxiety in him. He does not know the man he is alone with, but suspects that this might be the boss. He cannot tell. The boss’ voice sounds different on the phone, but there are ways to change one’s voice, make it lower and more menacing, make it sound like you are talking to a judgmental deity. If this man is the boss, he will not survive this meal.

“I know what you are thinking,” says the fat man, “you think that perhaps I am our employer. I am not him. I am someone else.”

“The thought never crossed my mind.”

“I told you that I know what you are thinking. I do. I know what you are thinking. You were thinking that I was our employer and that simply wasn’t so.”

He shrugs, trying his best not to show any kind of unease due to the fat man’s mindreading abilities.

“If you insist.”

“I do. How else do you think that I knew that it was your birthday?”

“Merde!”

Several waiters arrive. One of them is holding a cake. A man dressed as a penguin is with them. They begin to sing.

“Joyeux anniversaire, joyeux anniversaire...”

He panics. His reputation is compromised. His cool is compromised. He has been publicly confronted with the phenomenon of aging in the most demeaning manner possible. He does the sort of thing one does when they panic, the sort of thing people regret. He pulls his gun, points it at the fat man. His calmness and quiet cool are compromised further as his hands start to shake.

“Tell them to go. Tell them to go before I shoot you.”

The fat man laughs and then gets somber.

“If I could, I would. But the fact is, I can’t. Too many mistakes have been made. You will have to listen to them. You will have to have your birthday and eat cake.”

He knows that the fat man is right, but does not put down the gun.

“I don’t eat cake.”

“You’ll eat cake today.”

He holsters the gun, takes a piece of cake. His cool is compromised again as he takes a big, gooey mouthful. The fat man leans in close.

“I don’t want you to think that I’m not sympathetic to your plight. I am. And that is why I’m going to tell you where the boss can be found and thus, how you can be reunited with your lost love.”

The fat man slides a note across the table. On it is an address.

“Thank you,” he tells the fat man.

“Finish the cake. We don’t want people to suspect anything.”

“Oui.”

And he finishes the cake, doing his very damndest to avoid wincing or letting on that the cake gives me any discomfort, which it most certainly does. But there is

no avoiding it. There is no way he can risk letting on to the waiters that something is up since they are no doubt operatives in the syndicate and the syndicate moves very fast. So he eats slowly, pretending to savor the sweetness, as most would when presented with even the most unappealing of birthday cakes. And when he is done, he hops in the Renault driving fast as humanly possible to the address on the napkin.

“Merde!” he shouts, for in his rearview mirror he sees that the syndicate is onto him. There are two men in the car behind him. Where their heads should be, there are framed photographs. One is of an overweight family dressed in Christmas sweaters. The other is of an infant’s face floating against a nondescript sky blue background. Neither of these photographs serves very well as a face. In fact, they only serve to highlight that they have no faces. He does not ponder whether this is the original intention of having photographs for faces or whether it was a miscalculation. Bullets are flying at him and the car is gaining on him.

He could try and outshoot them. He could try and outdrive them. But that might not work. He pulls over to the side of the road, abandons the Renault and gets running, wandering the streets until he finds a bus, which he boards with no concern for where it is going. Wherever it’s going, it surely isn’t where the two photofaced gentlemen are. But what he has not counted on is that a dogged police inspector, (a police inspector because he is wearing a beige trenchcoat, dogged because it is quite rumpled) an older, more distinguished man with established movie star looks is aboard the bus ready to take him in the moment he steps on.

“I know what you’ve been up to,” says the dogged police inspector, “and the time has come for you to pay for your transgressions!”

The dogged police inspector draws his gun, pokes him in the chest with it.

“I’m bringing you in, you proud son of a bitch.”

He spits at the dogged inspector.

“I know who YOU are working for. I know where you’re bringing me.”

The dogged inspector holsters his gun. His eyes tear up.

“I am sorry,” the dogged inspector sobs, “there was nothing I could do. Promises were made. I had no...”

A ferocious, manly right hook, so hard that knuckle

and jaw alike make a cracking sound. He has bloodied his hand as well as the dogged inspector’s face. The dogged inspector hits the floor.

“Take your seat!” screams the bus driver. The two men do not. The dogged inspector rises to his feet, rubbing his injured face.

“I deserved that. I was selfish. I took the things that were offered. I bartered simple pride for hubris. I will take you to the boss. I will help you bring your lover home.”

The bus conveniently stops at the address the fat man left him. The two get out. The dogged inspector points the gun at his back. Is it part of a ruse to deceive the guards outside of the nondescript warehouse or an actual betrayal? Or was it the fat man that betrayed him? Or has this all been a single masterful betrayal? He breaks a torrential sweat as he approaches the place. The guards out front are twins. Each one has a framed nude photograph of the same fat old lady for a head. These are very tough customers. In the lady’s folds, in her nipples the color of halfcooked hamburger, he sees a kind of perverse strength. While so many of us put on sunglasses to cover a black eye or wear hats to obscure bad hair, these two show an unwavering courage presenting the body of a fat, naked, deformed hag every minute of every day.

“I’ve got him,” says the dogged inspector, “he’s...”

A photofaced guard shoots the dogged inspector dead. As well as being repulsive, they are slick and above falling for such elementary deceptions. He closes in on the photoface, gives him his best shot, punching straight through the frame. The photoface goes right down, as anyone whose face had just been punched through would. He draws his gun, shoots the other one straight through the old lady’s right breast. While intimidating, the picture frame is quite flimsy. How appropriate. So many criminals are like that.

He enters the warehouse. The room is empty save a desk. A man in a stylish blue suit sits at the desk. A black cloth is draped over his head.

“Are you the boss?” he asks the enigmatic figure. The enigmatic figure does not respond. It remains enigmatic.

“I am here to get the woman I love back. I am here to announce that I am leaving the syndicate.”

Whatever is underneath the black cloth remains unmoved. There are not even sounds of breathing.

“I am not here to play games. I quit. I am through with this life.”

Silence. Stillness. He approaches the desk. He lifts the black cloth. He clasps his chest. His heart explodes. He dies. He has seen something no man should see. What was under the cloth? Was it something as trite as a mirror? Something as banal as a skeletal face? Something as senselessly Freudian as the face of his mother? Something deeply absurd like a goldfish in a bowl? It is a mystery. It is either a thing of monstrous relevance or a thing that is completely moot. What matters is the man dead on the warehouse floor. A man worth paying attention to. Hip, cool, defiant and vanquished.





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# INVECTIVE

## D. Harlan Wilson

"I have no idea what the word 'criterion' is doing in the first sentence. Now then. What about the intentionality of the speaker, i.e., the insurgent Dionysian? This requires much more unpacking and expression. You are a fool, sir, in the best (i.e., Elizabethan) and worst (i.e., *cretin*) senses of the term. I saw you the other night at the burlesque show. You were on stage. You were doing a bad thing—*very* unclear in its context, and I never use the term 'very' frivolously, especially in light of its utter superfluity in the English language. Something (e.g., the trajectory of your relaxed belligerence) is 'very bad' or simply 'bad'—both denote badness. Please don't point the crutch of 'degrees of intensity' at me; bad is bad, 'very' or otherwise. This brings me to a higher echelon of contention. Why is [name of protagonist]'s desire 'nuclear' and 'embossed'? These usages, under the aegis of this itinerary, utterly flummox and escape me. Additionally, you overlook the profound naïveté of [name of secondary author]'s analysis of digital reality, which is so obviously about a self-deluded, self-righteous *pax Americana*. Furthermore, your articulation of a de facto 'messianic oubliette' is symptomatic of a larger problem, namely your unwillingness to engage with the material in any meaningful fashion. Remember when you emceed the Tony Awards?

"You pretended the ceremonies had nothing to do with music as you gesticulated and spat into the microphone like a dictator whose flock is running away from him even as he bleats. There's more. Careless blunders. Raging embellishments. And does the [name of subsidiary character] really exert a 'raw masculinity' and 'defend the ludicrous pomposity of [bleep] while looming on the sidelines as two teenagers awkwardly engage in coitus on the hood of a 1967 Chevy Camaro'? We all know that 1967 marks the birth of the Camaro. This is not to undermine the matter at hand: your inviolate slag. Let me assure you that being an academic has its perks. Money, for instance. By god I make over two hundred thousand dollars a year to tell young people how much shit

they pack between their ears for an hour or so per day; I spend the rest of my time looking a porn while 'writers' whore themselves all over creation just to buy groceries and cigarettes. Dumbfucks! Well. Most 'writers' are too stupid and lack the discipline to get a Ph.D., let alone hold down a teaching job, or any job—even pumping gas and data entry is too much of a challenge—so who can blame them for their bald degradation? Just stay out of my way when I step over [*Nom du père*]. Did I mention your galactic potential? That is because it does not exist. I confess I found the application of terms privileging debates about [important subjects] not particularly useful in thinking about a film, a dream, or reality. There is a lot more you could do with the [title of citation] raised in the 506<sup>th</sup> paragraph. Incidentally, if you cook and eat a sewer rat that is the size of a dog, it is very likely that you will contract a terminal disease. Hence: beware the consumption of mutant fucking rats. So. I have orders to shoot you on the spot and I've been going on and on like a . . . like a . . . what? I don't know. Somebody who goes on and on. Please stand still. Stand still. I can't aim when you're running back and forth like that. All right, I won't shoot you, but stop it. Thank you." Blam. "I missed. I apologize. I only had one bullet. Now I don't know what to do." Blam. "I missed again. I had another bullet, but I didn't tell you. You can stand still. I only had two bullets. Really. I'm going to be in big trouble on your account. Mind you. Incidentally, your earlier discussion on Queequeg and the denaturalists has massive potential for expansion and development. That's what I always tell my students, no matter what they do: expand and develop. They never listen. They do what they want." Blam. "Gotcha! No? Dammit. I guess there was a ghost cartridge in the chamber. Excuse me. I am experiencing a pain in my head. Right here. A very deep and antagonistic pain. I require a Vicodin. I'll be right back," said [name of detractor].

[Name of detractor] walked outside into the neighborhood. It was empty. He stood in the middle of a cul-de-sac and screamed, "Does anybody have a

Vicodin! I need one! There's a pain in my head!" He waited for a few minutes until somebody came out and walked into the cul-de-sac and gave him a pill.

"Just one?" said [name of detractor].

[Name of neighbor] shrugged.

"Do I know you?"

"I'm your neighbor," said [name of neighbor]. "I live next door. Right there. The house I just came out of.

[Name of detractor] thanked the neighbor and went back inside.

The sky swallowed a cloud.

[Name of protagonist] said, "I was in love with a common woman, once. We indulged in the entire spectrum of human existence in the span of a short night. We spoke about everything. We enacted everything. It was a tragedy."

Palsied, [name of detractor] replied, "Have you ever been thrown out of an airplane? My father did that to me once. I wasn't expecting it. I have been mocked before and I will be mocked again. But this business about the 'entire spectrum of human existence' is a red flag. 'Life is nothing more than a sequence of painful separations.' You said that. Those are your words. It is my contention that those are your words. You had stormed the entresol of the P'Zhang Theatre. You had jumped onto the railing and were striding up and down it like a funambulist. 'We are born,' you exclaimed, 'and the doctor takes us away from our mother. He tells somebody to give us a bath and then gives us back to our mother, and then we get taken away again, this time by our father, who wants to cuddle with us. There is a lot of back and forth at this point. Later, we are separated from our parents and sent to school. Just when we get used to school, we must go home to our parents. It's confusing.

"Later, we find a woman who we never want to leave; all day long we lay in bed and fuck like bohemians. But we must go to work. And then we have kids together and the cycle begins again. Do you understand?" On and on you went. Your thesis was plain enough: there's never enough time to grow roots. And yet you, sir, are an enemy of the root, as your behavior and your discourse, time and again, reify. This is not to say that I don't respect you. Here is my curriculum vitae." [Name of detractor] hands a c.v. to [name of protagonist]. "As you can see, I have fallen into a pit of fire on multiple occasions; I

allowed the flames to consume my flesh, then crawled out of the pit and started again. One must always start again. It is the nature of life. New beginnings. [Name of God] would have it no other way." Click. "I swear this gun isn't working." Click. Click. "This thing is broken." He moved the barrel from one temple to the other and pulled the trigger again. Click. "I'm going to set the weapon aside. It has ceased to retain a purpose, even as an object of intimidation, even as [name of the Phallus]. There. It's done. Do you have any cigars? Well. We must celebrate. It's not every day that one fails so excellently to live up to one's potential. If I may. There. Yes. Ahh. My boneless phalanges dangle into the void like fulminating counterparts. Are you aware that there is a hole in your [brand name of jeans]. Buy some new fucking [brand name of jeans]. If you think that I am spying on you, it is very likely that I am spying on you, even as I kneel before you." [Name of detractor] kneels. [Name of detractor] realizes he is already kneeling. "My irreconcilable vigilance is doubtless the reason I have come down so hard on you this afternoon. Repairing your 'text,' so to speak, may ultimately be a simple matter of linguistic, and hence neurological, fine-tuning. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. The egg of the Word came before the chicken of the Brain. No. When you fall into an inverted lotus pose it frightens me; time and again I am reminded of the crabs. More to the point, I acknowledge your intuition, but do you really think you can get away with any kind of intelligent discussion of [name of discussion] in the absence of an invocation of Ronald Reagan? I don't understand. I . . . Here, let me stand up now." He stands. "There."

An oubliette of ultraviolence superseded a hardcore sex scene that both [name of protagonist] and [name of detractor] observed with a calm, detached awareness.

"Tell me something. Will you take a polygraph? No? Fuck you!" exclaimed [name of detractor].

Wind blew across the savannah.

"Like I said earlier," continued [name of detractor]. "You should retain no hard feelings for me. I didn't say that? Well I'm saying it now. I am not cruel or antagonistic by nature, but if you fuck me, I'll fuck you back twice as hard. Apologies in advance. But the fact is people need other people to tell them what they're doing wrong. Otherwise we are little more than antelopes wandering up and down the streets of Pangea, alone, ornery, drunk on cactus water and riddled by dread. Have you ever attended the Human



Trafficking Convention? No? They teach you how to exploit human beings with flair and panache. I have been to every convention. I have attended all of the conventions, everywhere, on everything and everyone. I don't often pay attention to the panelists and the lecturers, even when I am serving on a panel or presenting a lecture, preferring instead to scrutinize the audience and take attendance. Let me tell you who attended my funeral. [Litany of names]. Do you hear that? Just to be sure." [Litany of names.] In the distance, monkeys screeched, elephants trumpeted. "What can I say? The jungle follows me everywhere I go. As for the yawning chasm of your existence, well, I wish you all the very best. I am going to step in that [name of hole] over there now." He steps in the [name of hole]. From the bottom, he says, "I'm in the [name of hole] now! Don't forget about me! The worst thing somebody can do to you is forget about you! Are you still there! Is anybody there! I'm all by myself down here! Help! Help!"

[Name of protagonist] helped [name of detractor] out of [name of hole]. There was nothing left to say.

"Thank you very much," said [name of detractor]. "Let me add that I don't like it when handmaidens have sex with farm animals. Spin it any way you like: I just don't like it, and I never will. You mention something to this effect in your sixty-third zeitgeist. Immediately thereafter you entertain the subject of gerontology. I do not understand the smell of old people. They all smell the same. They walk by me and the scent nearly knocks me off of my stilts. I think there is some kind of secret at work here to which I am less than privy. You reach a certain age and you become part of this club. The price: wear this perfume and traumatize a considerable percentile of the Human Stain. The younger percentile. The fact of the matter is that I am quite old and nobody has approached me about said club or said troublesome perfume. I could go on. And I will. There was a time when stiltwalkers existed under the thumb of a kind of anti-stiltwalking regime. 'Punish stiltwalkers,' was their mantra. Again I failed to experience any sort of involvement with the oppressed demographic, as if I had always-already been standing on my own two feet. I suppose you look at me and you see a man doing just that, standing here *in absentia* the fabled apparatuses." [Name of detractor] looked down and regarded himself sadly. "Indeed. There they are. The lack of the apparatuses."

"The lack of the apparatuses," echoed [name of protagonist].

"Do you ever get the feeling that your molecules are

dirty?" rejoined [name of detractor]. "I experience this feeling at least twice a day. My molecules feel like Biblical whores—the filth beneath the fingernails of Filth. Again, I convey these sentiments with the greatest of intentions. Viz., I intend to help you 'improve.' What's that you say? What? What? What? What? Say again?"

"The lack of the apparatuses," echoed [name of protagonist].

There was nothing left to say.

Wind blew across the savannah.

The sky swallowed a cloud.

"Just one?" said [name of detractor].

Blam.

Now then.

"I have no idea what the expression 'syncopated' is doing in the second to the last sentence. Nonetheless I hope these thoughts are of use to the author in revising his gestalt for publication since it does contain a lot of not-yet-fulfilled promise."



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# ONE MORNING

## BRUCE TAYLOR

(From: "Kafka's Uncle: the Ghastly Prequel and Other Tales of Love and Pathos From the World's Most Powerful, Third-World Banana Republic" Unpublished.)

Mr. Hamlin awoke one morning and lingered in bed as he usually did. A few minutes more. Age 40. Hair beginning to gray. He rubbed his eyes, then got up, noting again, yup, had to do something about that weight—twenty pounds over. He frowned in mild self-reproach, sighed, put on his jeans that had been draped over the chair, and shoved open the sliding mirrored door to the closet.

A silent, scrambling mass of scorpions descended on him; a wall of scorpions, each about an inch in length, folded over him like a living wall. Even though too stunned to move, he did notice one thing—they did not sting. Abruptly, he wanted to scream; he could not; he wanted to bolt, he wanted to run but the sheer mass of the arachnids encased him like a jacket; and then he felt himself carried. Somehow the arachnids left his eyes, his mouth alone. He could feel how the little beasts undulated like a wave down the stairs; when they came to the door, there was just a second's pause; it was like the arachnids had a group mind that, if several of the thousands of scorpions encountered a problem the rest of them could tackle and solve it immediately. Migod, Mr. Hamlin thought, they're acting like an organism.

Quite right, Mr. Hamlin heard; it almost sounded like a voice outside of himself, but he knew that wasn't so.

Telepathic, he thought.

Quite right again, came the voice. It was unemotional, matter-of-fact, like stating a case, might as well have been talking about the price

of hamburger at the local Safeway.

What are you going to do to me? thought Mr. Hamlin.

Don't worry.

Why me?

Pause. Why not you?

I'll be late for work, Mr. Hamlin thought, and then somehow felt silly.

So? came the reply.

What did I do to deserve this?

He was moving along the street now. He passed by Mrs. Effiger's place; she was gardening and waved gaily. "Hello, Mr. Hamlin, how are you today?"

Answer, came the voice, or she might get suspicious.

Somehow, he felt his mouth jerk open. What do I say? he thought.

Anything, came the answer. She never listens to anyone anyway.

"Help!" screamed Mr. Hamlin.

"You have a good day too, Mr. Hamlin!" and Mrs. Effiger promptly bent over and began working her garden again. Mr. Hamlin and his immense chitin entourage now moved past the drugstore; an entourage, like a vaguely human-shaped pillar of scorpions paused by the drugstore for just a second. A man waved gaily from the interior of the store. "Don't worry. You can pick up your prescription tomorrow," a voice called out. Mr. Hamlin then came to Mercer Street, a very busy thoroughfare, and stood for just a second for a break in traffic before stepping off the curb.

Whoop! went a siren, then an electronically enhanced voice. "Wait until the light turns red," said the officer. The scorpions let Mr. Hamlin turn his head to see the police cruiser nearby. Say something came the voice.

"Help!" screamed Mr. Hamlin.  
"I won't write a ticket this time," said the officer,  
"but don't do it again." And the car sped off.  
And as soon as the sign turned to "Walk" and the  
traffic stopped, the mass of scorpions, with Mr.  
Hamlin as its nucleus, continued on.  
I didn't know you could read, he thought.  
We learn quickly, came the reply. We hope to  
learn Spanish in a couple of hours after we're  
through.  
What do you mean, 'after we're through'?  
Just that.  
I don't like this.  
No answer.  
Where are we going? he thought.  
Might as well sleep, came the answer, we have a  
long ways to go.  
Mr. Hamlin closed his eyes. He realized that  
it didn't really feel all that bad being carried;  
the scorpions weren't hurting him; he wished  
he could sit, but the mass of arachnids kept  
him upright. Abruptly, and feeling profound  
embarrassment, he realized he had to pass gas.  
And he couldn't stop himself.  
prapp-pap-pap. Must have been the damn  
cabbage.  
Came the collective voice of the scorpions, You  
don't digest cabbage very well, do you?  
No, thought, Mr. Hamlin, I'm sorry, I don't. Food  
allergies.  
You should rotate your foods; but don't be sorry,  
came the voice, it was refreshing. We enjoyed it.  
Thanks.  
They moved on and strangely, Mr. Hamlin found  
that he could sleep and, for a few minutes did  
so until he suddenly realized that they had  
stopped—and abruptly, all the scorpions that had  
been carrying him, literally melted off him, peeled  
off him in layer after layer. Suddenly, not having  
anything supporting him, he fell to the ground—  
whump—on his butt. He looked up.  
Three moons in the sky. And constellations he  
did not recognize.  
Do not be alarmed, came a voice.  
"How can I not be? said Mr. Hamlin out loud. "I  
don't think this is Earth."  
Abruptly, he turned, realizing that he didn't know  
where the voice was coming from. And then he  
stared; above him hovered an immensely large  
scorpion.

"Where in God's name. . .?" he began.  
Just think the words, said the large scorpion,  
you'll wake the children. The scorpion turned  
obliquely. Small scorpions clung to it.  
Sorry, thought Mr. Hamlin. Then, Now that you  
brought me—how did I—?  
The group mind is very powerful, came the voice.  
What do you want from me?  
Several things, actually, came the voice. First,  
you creatures are always looking down on us.  
How does it feel to now be looked down upon?  
Mr. Hamlin swallowed. Scary. But just because  
I look down upon you—well, how can I not look  
down upon you—I mean, the smaller you—I  
mean, I don't look down upon you with anger or  
vengeance—I look down upon you because I'm a  
hell of a lot bigger than you. How can I not look  
down upon you? Just like right now, how can  
you not look down upon me?  
There was a pause. Hm, came the mind voice;  
we hadn't thought of that. Perhaps genius can  
be mistaken. But not often. Anyway, aside from  
that, we need something else from you.  
Chink! A small glass bottle landed at Mr. Hamlin's  
feet.  
What? thought Mr. Hamlin.  
We need a sacrifice from you for our fertility rites.  
Necessary for our ritual.  
The man looked up at the scorpion.  
You want—  
Sperm, came the voice. We don't really care  
where it's from—we've decided that animals just  
don't work—too much effort—we've heard that  
cooperative humans are much better.  
But—I don't want to—I mean, I don't know if I  
can—I mean—  
Oh, came the voice, can't get it up? Or what?  
Well, thought Mr. Hamlin, I mean, you know . . .  
Rather I turn away? Although it is disappointing;  
I really hoped to see how you did it.  
Mr. Hamlin looked helplessly about, to the sandy  
plain, the dark sky, the moons. How can I say it?  
he thought, I just can't get . . . excited . . .  
Chink. A large, gold nugget landed at Mr.  
Hamlin's feet. Will that excite you?  
Mr. Hamlin sighed, picked up the bottle and  
turned his back to the scorpion. Just a minute,  
he thought. He thought of Ellen Sue Backleford,  
how she clasped her legs around his waist, how  
she groaned and moaned—

Well, came the voice, certainly seems bizarre to me—

“Would you not interrupt me,” snarled Mr. Hamlin. —how she groaned and then moved beneath him—“emph” he said, “ahhh” he sighed and he finally zipped his pants and handed the jar to the scorpion.

Not very much, the scorpion said, considering all that intense visualization—

Considering the circumstances, be glad you got any.

It’ll do, came the voice. Then, a piercing whistle. And the mass of scorpions came, and again, Mr. Hamlin was like a little seed in a dark, moving vertical phallus of soil.

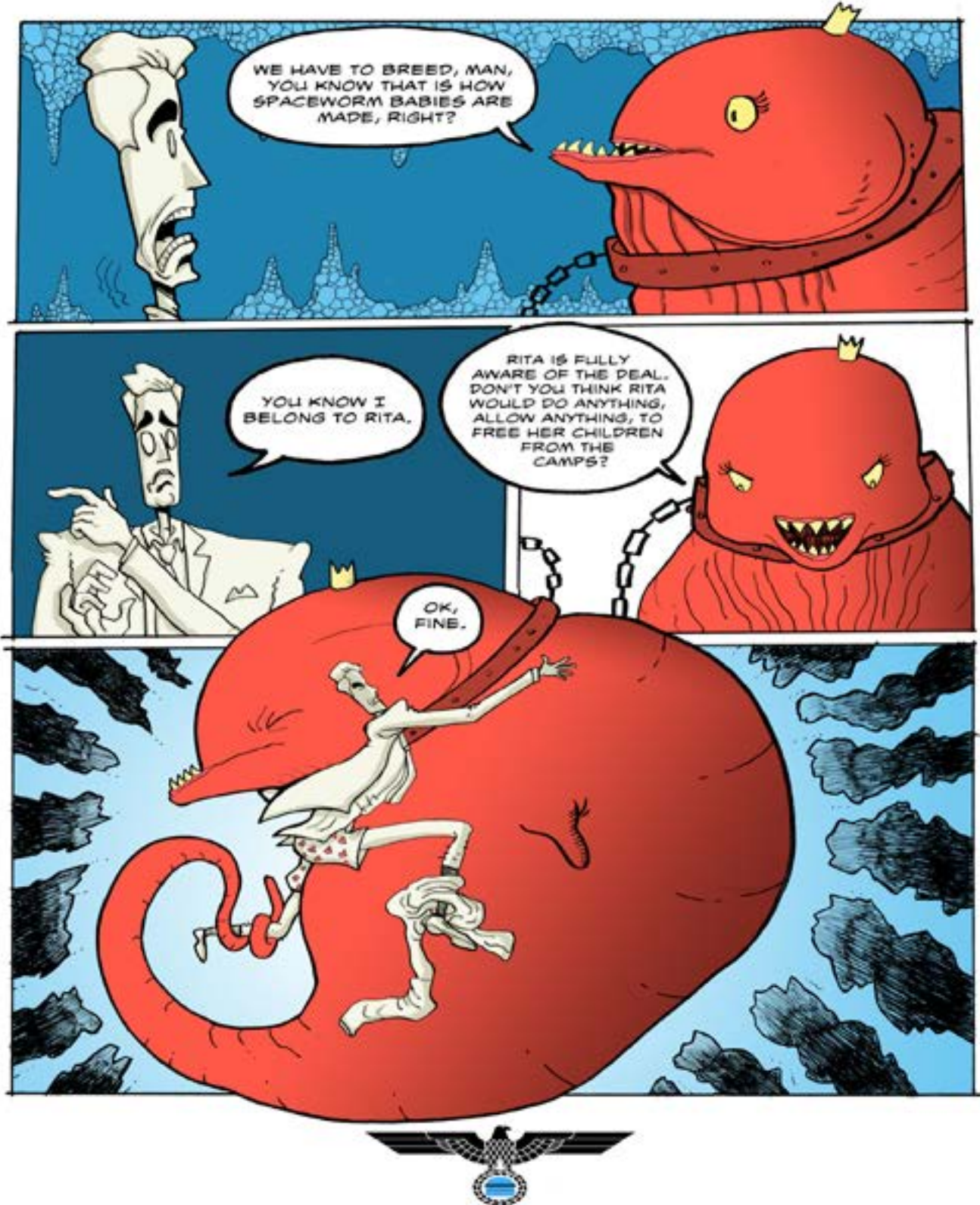
Thank you, he heard the huge scorpion say. We’ll think of you during the rites. Words of your wonderful help will travel far and wide. Thank you.

And for the first time, he heard an overwhelming chorus of little voices, separate voices from the scorpions who carried him, Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! And then a single combined voice, Thank you! And, seemingly within minutes, he was taken back to his apartment. There, right next to his bed, the mass of scorpions, layer after layer, peeled away from him and like a four-foot tall amoeba, flowed out the bedroom door, down the stairs and out the front door. Click. Even closing the door behind them.

“Oh, my God!” whispered Mr. Hamlin, “Oh, my God!” He fell into the bed—and slept—only to awaken seemingly a short time later—totally unable to move. He could turn his head slightly, enough to see that he was bound by silk to the bed. And had been stripped naked. And slowly, at the end of the bed, a large spider rose up and began climbing on the bed. And in his mind, Mr. Hamlin could hear words, Oh, darling, I’ve heard such good things about you. . .

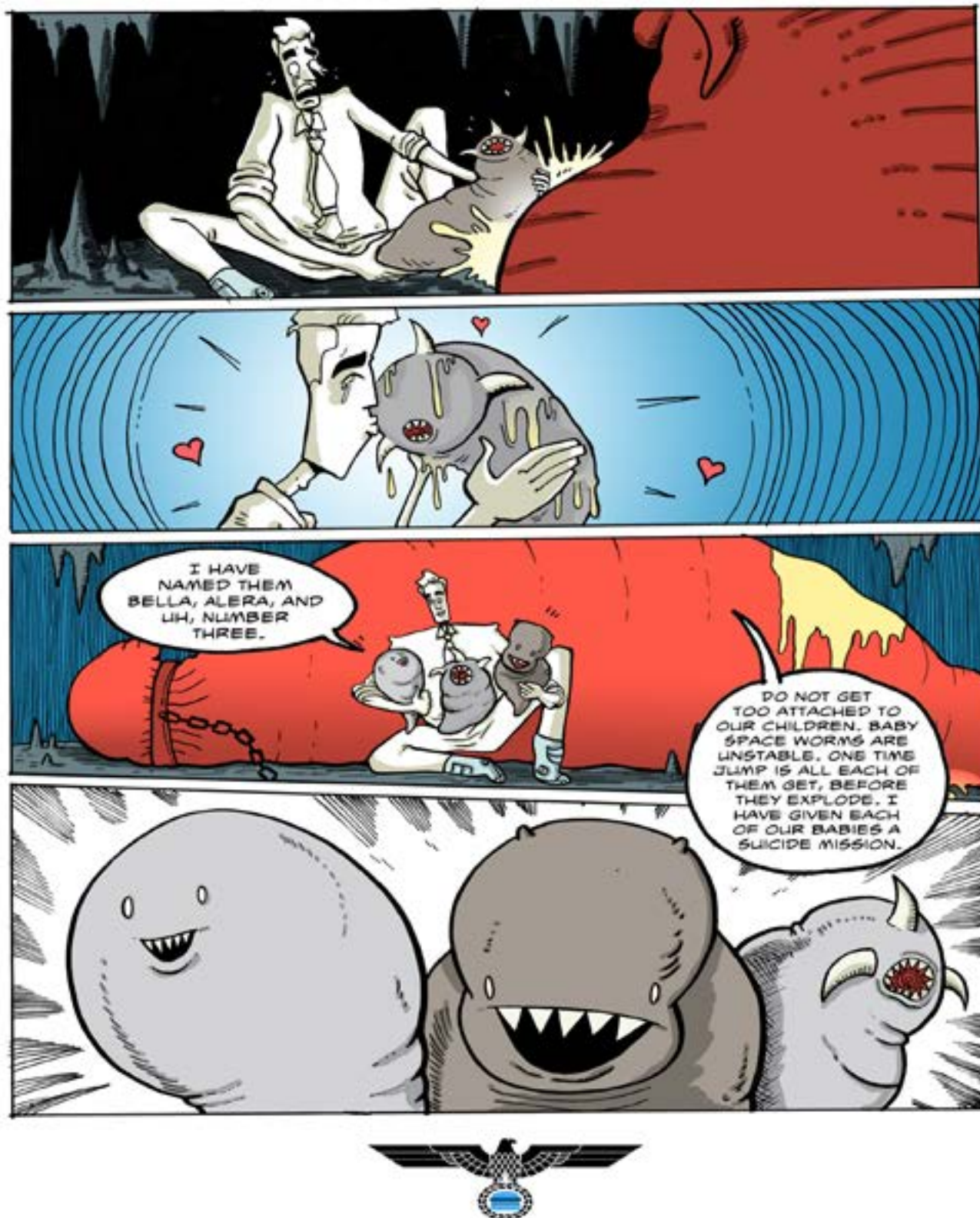


# EAGLEBURGER BY GABE OSTLEY



Readers can read more at [Oddkredenzas.com](http://Oddkredenzas.com)

# Y, RUDY DEAN AND JEF STOUT





JUMP IN,  
WE'RE OUT  
OF TIME.



WHEN BELLA  
DROPS YOU OFF,  
YOUR BODY WILL  
REMAIN WITHIN HER,  
BUT YOUR SOUL MAY  
EXPLORE THE EVENT.  
AS A GHOST, YOU  
WON'T BE ABLE TO  
CHANGE TIME.

NOW  
REPEAT  
THIS  
MAGIC  
SPELL...

"ANCIENT  
DEAD FREE  
& ACCEPTED  
MASONS,  
CUT ME  
IN HALF."

"ANCIENT  
DEAD FREE  
& ACCEPTED  
MASONS..."



...CUT ME  
IN HALF."

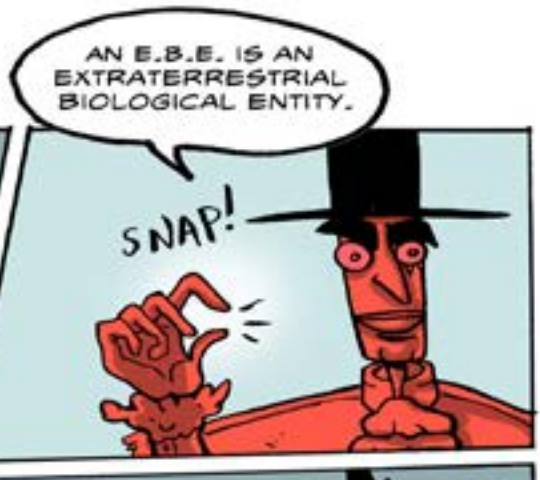




ROSWELL ARMY AIRFIELD, NEW MEXICO. 1947.









SIX MONTHS LATER.

IT'S BEEN MONTHS, AND YER STILL DEALING WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF KILLING A SPACE ALIEN. WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, DT?

LOOK, WHEN IT COMES TO KILLING PEOPLE I'M RUTHLESS. BUT IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE I SHOT AN ALIEN, IT FEELS LIKE I KILLED A FALLEN ANGEL. IN COLD BLOOD.

THE LATEST INTEL ON THESE CELESTIAL BEINGS IS THAT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPACE ALIENS AND DEMONS IS NEGLIGIBLE.

FALLEN ANGELS ARE EXACTLY WHO YOU HAVE BEEN RECRUITED TO EXECUTE.

IT'S YOUR JOB. CAN YOU HANDLE IT?

I CAN HANDLE IT.

GOOD. THEN I DON'T HAVE TO ORDER YOU TO TERMINATE YOURSELF. WE HAVE A BASE OF OPERATIONS NOW.

WE SET UP A SECRET SPACE PROGRAM IN THE DESERT. TO REVERSE ENGINEER THE TECHNOLOGY WE INHERITED. IT'S ALSO A SECURE PLACE TO INTERROGATE AND EXECUTE E.B.E'S

WHERE IS IT EXACTLY?

NEVADA, THE DESERT. YOU'LL FIND IT ON OLD ARMY MAPS LISTED AS AREA 51. IF YOU CAN FIND THE PLACE, YOU GOT YOUR JOB BACK. WE'VE COLLECTED A CAMP FULL OF FALLEN ANGELS YOU NEED TO DEAL WITH.





DEEP  
THROAT WAS SUPER  
CONNECTED TO AREA 51  
SINCE THE BEGINNING. AND  
HE WASN'T LYING ABOUT  
EXECUTING ALIENS,  
BELLA. WE CAN TRUST  
HIM.





DALLAS, TEXAS. 1963



BACK AND TO THE LEFT, SWEET CHEEKS!



DEEP THROAT!  
NO!





<http://www.scottradke.com/>

# EEP, OOP, AND SOMETIMES HUZZAH

BY MICHAEL A ROSE

I'm killing myself right now.

I'm placing the chair just so, centered underneath a strong 4x4 wooden beam in the ceiling of this tiny log cabin I've rented in the woods. I'm finding a rope in the storage space that seems about the right length. I'm working from a boyscout manual, trying to reverse engineer a butterfly knot into a sliding noose. I'm throwing the rope over the edge of the beam and catching it deftly with my other hand. I'm tugging on both ends to test the strength of the wood, and listening to a silence from which no crack or splinter escapes. I'm tying a timber hitch knot near the base of the rope, so it will not slip off the beam and send me flailing to the wooden boards below. I'm placing a metal folding chair directly underneath the noose, and climbing up to take one last look around.

It's winter. Snow is piling up on the window ledge. I hold onto the rope, carefully maneuvering my head through the loop I've made, and tighten the knot like a necktie. I feel for the edge of the chair's back with my left foot, and find purchase.

I kick, hard.

And I'm traveling upward at great speed, through a trap door that has somehow opened up in the ceiling, and through the roof, through the bird droppings on the roof, through the sky, through the clouds, and that's all I can see. White clouds; a gentle mist everywhere, and I feel the moisture on my skin. I've never believed in heaven, or an afterlife, but this illusion, or fever dream, or brain-fart death-rattle is pretty convincing, and I find myself trying not to shit my pants.

Whenever you read about suicides on the internet, you always read snarky comments about the victim shitting his or her pants. I am determined not to be that kind of statistic. While thinking this, I come to realize that not only am I still in control over my bowels, but I can still feel the rope around my neck, tight and uncomfortable, but with just enough give

to allow me the sensation of flying through the air at great speed without the usual accompanying brain death and cessation of all vital functions, which is what I am expecting any moment now.

I'm coming to rest above the surface of what looks like a perfectly translucent lake of mist. I can see the outlines of waves and particles, but nothing substantial. Above, a ring of rock circles around me, the surface of which I am dangling below on the end of this rope around my throat, and so I am surprised to hear a voice coming from somewhere above me and to my left.

"Throw it back," says the first voice.

"Sorry, sorry, I know, it's kind of small," supplicates the second.

"Do you have a size fixation? What do you think that means?" tries the third.

"BEEP" beeps the fourth.

I'm being hauled higher, pulled by my neck, feeling muscles tense. Microscopic tears in the tissues make my throat itch. I look up, and there is a long, thin, sky-blue rod curving over me like the horizon and the rope follows up the shaft, disappearing into the ethereal mist.

I am yanked violently forward. My eyes close involuntarily against the strain. I find it difficult to breathe, and I find myself flopping around on a solid surface, afraid to open my eyes, unable to take in air, everything behind my eyelids is rapidly being colored a violent shade of crimson, like the sun in shining in my face, penetrating my eyelids. I am gasping, flailing my limbs, trying to grasp what is happening to me.

I feel a burst of air in my face, like a high pressure hose was briefly engaged and then turned off, and suddenly I am able to breathe again. I inhale rapidly, afraid that I will hyperventilate but unwilling to show



patience in the face of whatever is allowing me to vacuum up precious oxygen and fill my lungs.

I gasp, audibly: “Eep” is the sound it makes, and I hear a small noise of appreciation appear from around me, in stereophonic surround-sound.

I am slowly opening my eyes, I am looking up, and filling my vision against a blazing iridescent sky are the heads and shoulders of four young long-haired men. All four are wearing garments that look a lot like spa or resort bathrobes, complete with terrycloth waist-tie, but there are differences between them too.

I am seeing them through a bubble, fractured glass, heatwaves, my eyesight not trustworthy and my lack of oxygen only contributing to my overall confusion. In the interest of description and categorization, I assign them cardinal directions based on the position in which I am oriented.

North: A bearded, moustached face, long greasy hair hanging down to the middle of his back. He yawns and licks his lips. His eyelids droop over red-rimmed eyes, the veins expressing things words never could.

East: The same beard and moustache as with the first, only his hair is more neatly trimmed and seems shinier and more recently washed. His wide eyes reveal a nervous agitation.

South: Again, the moustache and beard combination are present, however they are shaped into sharp, curt topiary shapes. He wears tiny round spectacles. His eyes are just as sharp, and he is looking me over with detached disinterest and writing something in a tiny notebook which looks to be bound in human skin.

West: The glare is too bright to see clearly, but I catch metallic glimpses of brushed steel as I hear a loud “BEEP.” His hair looks like tarnished silver steel-wool.

And I’m feeling my muscles convulse like an electric current is running through them, making me twitch, the action slowing as I get used to the oxygen mixture in the air I’m breathing, my lungs filling and deflating slower now. I am blinking up at these strange figures and they are all staring directly at me, and I do not know what is happening.

The one with the bloodshot eyes is reaching down toward me with a stick, solid blue against the already

blue sky, rendering it practically invisible. He is poking me with it in the side and I feel my floating rib shift uncomfortably with the force of his assault. I am involuntarily emitting a sound somewhere between an “ouch” and a sigh, the sound of someone being punched in the stomach by an angry fifth-grader. The characters above me let out a cheer (technically, three cheers and a BEEP).

“Listen to him! His instincts toward death, the desire for thanatos, belie his life instincts, as he grasps for meaning in his moment of ego-death!” says the bespectacled one.

“Hey, you pulled too hard,” the greasy looking one is saying to the nervous looking one, “He’s all priapic now. Gross.”

I am reaching down to check myself, as I am having a great deal of trouble moving my head right now, and they are right. I am fully and painfully erect. My face feels warm as I blush like a boiled beet.

“Obviously, he has a fixation with his own penis,” said the one with glasses, adjusting them.

“BEEP,” says the metallic one.

I am opening my mouth, trying to form coherent words. The nervous looking one is bending down, reaching out. His hand is passing through a barrier of some kind, ripples and waves flowing outward from his wrist as though I’m looking out at him from inside a bucket of water, but there is no liquid around me and I realize I am parched. He touches me on the forehead, and I immediately feel a crippling sense of calmness; my muscles turn into soup.

“Leave him alone,” says the one with the wide eyes. “He’s terrified.”

“They don’t feel anything,” says the red-eyed greasy one, derisively. “Quit being such a bleeding heart.”

“1001011101011010001011001010001010101,” says the metallic one, helpfully.

The one with the glasses reaches down toward me, and I see a ripple tear across the invisible surface of some border above me I do not fully understand. I am unable to move, and I feel his hands gently untie the knot around my neck and pull the rope up and around my head. My throat feels wet, a sure sign that the noose tore my skin and that I am bleeding.

“It is likely that they feel some semblance of pain, even if it’s only psychological,” says the man with the glasses, shaking his long hair out of his face. “There is no need to extend his suffering.”

I am willing myself to move, my muscles straining, rebelling against my wishes, aching and contracting without my direction. My whole body shakes with effort and I undergo a sudden transformation, a seizing, crippling contraction that sends my whole body upward. I am crashing through an invisible membrane, and everything is slowing to a halt. Droplets are frozen in mid-air around me, and I am outside myself, an observer. I see myself bent, frozen in space, as the four figures around me jerk with surprise. I hear noise that sounds vaguely like speech, but none of it makes sense, the words backward and under pressure like they're being spoken through a layer of gelatin.

I am suddenly aware that I can no longer breathe, and the space inside my head shrinks to a pinpoint, I have the sensation of floating and I am drowning in an empty space. Suddenly, like an engine turning over and coming to life, time is jarringly sped up to normal as I am gripped tightly by a large metal hand and plunged violently back downward, crashing into a blinding light, my vision swelling and bursting into pinpricks of color and sound. I feel the hand let go, and I relax, my energy spent. I am listening hard, hearing the sounds reconfigure from puzzle pieces into words and letters I can understand.

"Sorry!" the nervous voice cries out, "I didn't expect him to jerk like that."

"It's okay," a lazy, muttering drawl creeps down to my ears. The voices are quieter now, and I glance upward, seeing that the faces that hovered over me before have receded into the mist.

I begin to look around me, my ability to see finally returning to normal, and as I do, it becomes apparent that shapes are floating around me. Human forms, but blurry and out of focus, like they were peeled from an old news-reel.

I am feeling the functionality return to my limbs, and I kick out my legs in a feeble attempt to move. I am sliding across the space, toward the figures, watching them flicker in and out of space. One in particular catches my interest, and I am pushing myself, wriggling and writhing toward the figure. This one is brighter than the rest, the outline more crisp. I am getting closer and details are starting to creep into the outline. I am watching something being drawn, and what starts as giant crayon circles become eyes and a mouth, and I am startled. I begin to kick my legs, propelling myself faster through whatever matter I am immersed in, and the features begin to make themselves clear.

Her eyes are focusing in on mine, and she looks as startled as I feel. I am struggling to bring my limbs fully under my control. I am reaching out, stretching my arms toward this ethereal dream. To my surprise, the figure reaches out toward me. I see her face take on a cast of grim determination as she elongates her body, stretching out her fingers toward mine. She is opening her mouth slightly, like she wants to say something. Guttural noises arise from my own throat. I am unable to express myself, my words disintegrating into noise on my tongue.

And our fingers are only inches from touching. I could swear that I feel her warmth, emanating outward in waves. My shoulder feels ready to pop, my neck freshly bleeding as I stretch toward her. Our fingers are coming together like a painting of man and god, and finally, the tips of our fingers mingle together, her skin grazing mine. For a moment, I feel an electric tingle, a shared humanity, and I am watching her face contort, her lips making the shapes of words, then there is a sudden movement, and she is jerked away. I see her eyes widen in surprise, and I watch as she disappears upward and out of sight. I see that she has fresh scars on her wrists, and it looks like a sky-blue fish hook is threaded through each one.

"This one's mine!" the voice of the greasy-haired one booms from above. The four have returned to their positions above me. There is an enormous flash of light and the world explodes, and I am once again in the metal hand.

"BEEP" says the robotic christ-like figure holding me high above the rock circle.

I notice now there is a new figure, a fifth one, wearing goggles and holding a large electronic device, made of the same sky-blue material I see everywhere else something unnatural occurs in this place.

"Are you sure you want that one? He's a bit small," says the nervous one.

"He makes noises," says the greasy one.

The one wearing the goggles pulls them back and laughs. "I've just gotten back from the beginning. I'm not picky."

The figures share a laugh at this. I know somehow that this the only chance I will have to take action, and I muster up all the strength in my body, the energy is building inside my stomach and finally I bellow with all my might.

"Hooooooooink!" I cry.

The long-haired giants turn to me, excitement in their eyes.

"Did you hear that, gentlemen?" says the one with the glasses, writing in his notebook furiously.

He turns a page and continues writing. I see that each page is also made of human skin, the pores and tiny hairs showing between the millions of tiny stitches holding each page together.

"Oop! Hooooooo?" I shriek, drowning in their laughter.

"I am Psycholojesus," he says, his notebook disappearing somewhere outside of my version of reality. "These are Apolojesus, Letharjesus and Chronolojesus," he says, pointing respectively to the nervous looking, bleary-eyed, and begoggled figures.

"DOES NOT COMPUTE," the silver one bellows. Before the doctor says anything, I already know that this is Technolojesus. I am struggling to understand why I can understand them, but not speak to them. I try again, but my breath is ragged, and I gasp, drowning in what feels like air but can't possibly be.

"Peeeeesss, whhhhhhhhhhaar!" I bellow, and then I feel death squeeze my chest and plunge me into darkness. I smell cooking flesh. I hear "Throw him back in the well, he's delightful."

I am floating in limbo, my memory is fading and when I see something new, it doesn't take long before the details disappear and only a fragment of a memory remains. I am floating here in the air, breathing in my own stale odor. They have provided me with a tiny castle, it looks like my old house but all the walls are fake, constructed of that sky-blue matter. There are statues shaped like people here, but they are not people. They are sky-blue nightmares, unable to speak, unable to see, unable to think. Each of them has a mark somewhere on their body, evidence of a suicide. My neck has not healed, but the scar tissue has turned hard and scaly. As I move, I come to a border, and I am tapping against it, trying to understand why I can not move beyond it, but I can not find a solution and I soon move on.

I am catching glimpses of the Jesuses moving around outside my world. They are giants, indescribably terrifying and beyond my ability to comprehend. How long have I been here? I do not know. Every moment feels like it stretches back to the beginning of time, and though I have an understanding of what is happening to me in this present moment, I do not know how long I have been here or whether I have always been here. I spent my time practicing knots. They have provided a rope. It looks familiar, but from a long time ago.

Now a hand is grabbing me. It is "Letharjesus," he lazily looks at me through bleary

eyes and says "Listen," as I try once again to speak, to understand. "Fooooop," I groan. A crowd of Jesuses roars out a "Huzzah" echoing all around me, the sound omnipresent. They're doing a dance now. They look like they'll never run out of energy.

Suicides don't go to hell. They don't go to hell. There's no need for a hell.



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# ‘Mr. Smarty-pants’ pills

## by Tony Rauch

- part one – the pills -

I’m sitting in class. It’s a typical morning. Nothing special going on – nothing too boring or too exciting – just average, ordinary. Pretty much what you’d expect. We’re doing our homework when the teacher claps her hands and announces: “OK students, it’s test day.”

We all just look around, surprised, for no tests had been scheduled and thus we have not prepared. The teacher walks the aisles of desks with a small tin of pills. She rattles the tin in her palm, the pills knocking back and forth. When she gets to the end of the first aisle, she turns and marches back, placing a pill on the corner of each desk. “These are your smart pills,” she announces, “Ingest one, and only one, and things will be fine.”

I stare at the pill resting on the corner of my desk, then slowly reach for it, pick it up, considering it from a distance with my fingers, rolling it around, looking it over, then I bring it up to my face for a closer to examination. It’s just a big ol’ oblong pill with no distinguishing characteristics.

Some of the more obedient students, the more impressionable, and ones who weren’t really paying all that much attention immediately gulp their pills. They take them without thinking about it while they’re looking down and reading.

“We’ll finally be geniuses,” Marty whispers a pessimistic chuckle to himself, rolling his eyes. “At last, it’s this simple.”

“What’re you talkin’ ‘bout, Mart? The depths of your perception is already unfathomable,” Weeden whispers.

“Here’s to Hall of Fame minds,” Ned shrugs. I hear him gulp his pill down.

I stay still, only moving my eyes to look around, watching as the others take their pill without even thinking about it. I pretend to eat mine, but really drop it into my shirt pocket.

Then teacher hands out the tests. I can’t believe how hard it is. I can barely understand the questions. And I’m an average student (I pride myself on doing just enough work to remain in my averageness). I can’t help but keep glancing over to see my other fellow students just whipping through the answers like they’re nothing, like they’d written the test themselves. An hour later, when it’s over, the girl next to me blinks strangely and says, “Man, that was odd.”

“Yer tellin’ me,” I whisper, looking around.

Later, in the afternoon, there’s a knock at the classroom door.

We’re all studying quietly. The teacher stands from her desk, walks to the door, opens it, and there in the hall stand two very clean looking men in crisp white lab coats. The men nod and whisper, one leaning close to my teacher and holding a small index card. The teacher nods and whispers back as one of the men points at the index card. The teacher also points at the card and nods, indicating she understands what they are getting at. Then she turns and points to two or three of us. Then they lean in close again and whisper some more. Then teacher nods and turns to spin back into our classroom. She walks to her desk. “OK,” she draws up a big breath as if to make an important announcement, “Looks like it’s going to be a special day here. . . Ah, looks like a few of you will be going to the office for a moment for some more tests. . . Ah, it’s . . . Ah. . . All a part of the testing from this morning. . . They just want to go over a few things again. . . Just to clarify things. . . Janey and Tommy . . . ah. . . and you,” she nods to me, “Please take your books and follow these gentlemen down the hall.”

I sit there stunned for a moment. Janey and Tommy are by far the most different students in class. Janey always comes up with answers that just don’t fit. I mean, they don’t even come close. We all figured her for a genuine dimwit, or some kind of genius. We couldn’t tell which. I mean, you never know with some people.

Tommy never says anything or does much. We figured

him for some kind of drone, some future assembly line worker, or possibly someone suited for the military. Basically someone who was OK, all right, so long as they didn't have to think for themselves. Yeah, he was your basic blank page, your basic doorstep, your basic speed bump. So I could see why the school district would need to weed out those two as they were so far off the chart, such an extreme that a regular school may not be equipped to properly serve their unique, individual needs.

Janey and Tommy stood immediately and collected their books, sliding them off their desks and into their bags and walking to the front door.

"Come on, you," the teacher bent and cajoled kindly. "Don't you want to see what happens next?" I guess she was talking to me because she was looking right at me. But she had never treated me that way before, I mean talking to me like I was a lost puppy or something.

"Ah, not really," I stammer, "I'm fine right here. . . . Think I'll sit this one out," and return my attention to my book.

Some of my fellow classmates chuckle. I look around. Some are staring at me blankly, as if they know they'll never see me again and are writing me off in their minds entirely, just sitting there erasing me from their memories, less they become infected with the taint of me. I can feel their silent disapproval swelling across their faces, that heavy vibe hanging around the room – 'yep, looks like that's it for you, you're not one of us anymore.' Just like that.

"Come on," the teacher cajoles again, as if I were a puppy and just learning to walk.

Finally, I slide off my desk, as if I realize things are not going to resume unless and until I make my exit. I stand, reach to pull my book bag from off the back of my chair, slide my books in, and swing the bag over my shoulder. I stand for a second, looking around. But I know something they don't – that I didn't even take their stupid smart pill, thus I know this is all just a stupid misunderstanding. A mistake. A phantom. A gag. A gasser.

Many of them look me over, staring as if I suddenly wasn't one of them anymore. They look at me with contempt, pity, disdain, disbelief, as if I had fooled them or something, lied to them. Others simply look away, as if ashamed or embarrassed at the very sight of me. A few of them return to their business of studying, as if I was already out of their minds and out

of their lives entirely, as if I never even mattered or existed in the first place.

I slowly walk down the aisle, my shoes shuffling loudly on the tile floor. By the time I get to the door, Janey and Tommy and the two really clean looking men are already in the hallway. I stop and stand in the doorway for a second. I turn and look at everybody, looking the class over, again, as if I know something they don't. Even some of my so-called better friends won't look at me. It's as if I've been wasting their time since I've known them, like I've pulled something over on them and now I'm suddenly exposed as some kind of lying fraud and they're mad at me for trusting me all this time, like I've wasted a lot of their time or something. Now most of the class has already returned to their studies, as if by now I no longer exist. Even the teacher is back at her desk, flipping through a magazine about autopsies.

The two clean men in the hall wave me out, friendly and casually, as if they were my best friend. You could feel their phoniness clogging the air like a slow, sticky syrup.

I turn and stomp out with a numb ball in the pit of my gut, as if something inside of me knew I wouldn't ever be back, that this was the last moment with these so-called friends, that I'd never see them again.

- part two – the other room -

We walk down the silent, dank hallway. The darkness turns from a cool calm to an ominous foreboding. I go numb all over now, that feeling in my gut spreading. It feels like I'm being swallowed by some great unfeeling beast, the hall becoming its gullet.

The two clean men's shoes clack like a ticking clock. Tommy and I wear tennis sneaker shoes. Tommy's are older, full of holes, as were his clothes. Janey wears girl's dress shoes, which shuffle softly. She looks about happily, as if this is a pleasant adventure, as if we're just going to the Media Center or something. She skips without a care. Tommy looks down as if he's been dreading this moment his entire life, expecting any day that one day it would all come to pass, that they'd finally get around to shipping him off to work in a reeking landfill or stinking slaughterhouse or something, as if the deep dank depths of the nightshift is his lot in life.

The long, institutional hallway seems to grow and stretch on forever, hard and bland, cold and empty - a

completely colorless and uninspiring landscape.

Finally we reach a room by the office. I'd never been in this room before. We walk in. Once inside, it seems a lot larger than it looks from the hallway. Several other kids are sitting on chairs at one end. One of them, Johnny, I kind of knew from the bus. They gesture over to the chairs and Janey and Tommy and me all walk over to that end of the room. I walk to the chairs, spin and look around. Janey takes a seat without thinking about it. For some reason Tommy sits in a slump on the floor. He looks like a lump of wet cement, like a slumping, uneven pile. Finally I settled in next to Johnny. What else could I do? I consider taking off, just running out the door, heading down to the creek or the alley we hang out at. But for some reason I sit down. Maybe I sense the futility of running – that somehow I know I'd be right back here tomorrow. Or maybe I'm curious to see where this will all go.

The two clean men walk over and talk to several other official looking clean men in crisp white lab coats. They look like clean ghosts, fresh off the line – like they'd just been washed, then taken from the clothesline in the backyard on a sunny summer afternoon.

Johnny leans over to me. "Word is they took Jimmy out of class today," he whispers through the chewing of his gum, then pauses dramatically, "He never came back."

"Where'd they take him?" I whisper back. Jimmy rode the bus with us, but hung out in back with Johnny because they got on before me, thus have their pick of seats. The back is always the best – more privacy. Jimmy's a decent kid, but not super friendly – spends most of his time sitting quietly, staring and thinking.

"Don't rightly know," Johnny sighs, "I reckon words goin' round. Someone thought they looked him over. Gave him a physical examination. Several doctors in a back room. . . They didn't like what they saw. They say he won't be back."

"Ah, that's prob'ly just a bad rumor," I exhale, "Like when they said they put something in the school's drinking water. Or when they said they put something in our bubblegum," I look around. Most of the other kids seem to be happy to be there. Tommy just sits there staring at the floor. Janey stares out the window and whispers to herself as if she were counting or something. "What's their problem? He gets decent

grades, anyways."

"They looked at his genes. His longevity. His brain chemicals. Stuff like that."

"How do you know?"

"Just what I heard, man," Johnny shrugs, "But it sort of makes sense. I mean, look around. . . And the water around here does taste funny lately."

"Yeah. Got a tang to it."

"I say we get out of here," Johnny looks around, "I don't like the looks of this."

"Why are we even here? This doesn't make any sense."

"Did they try to give you a pill? Then have you take some test?"

I nod, my head looking down, but my eyes looking all around, checking out the door and the window, searching for an opening. The attendants are at the front of the room, talking to one another, checking over clipboards they carry. They stand around a card table, a nurse sits in a chair behind it, checking over stacks of paper.

For no real reason Janey slid off her chair and began dancing in place, just swaying and convulsing back and forth and grinning, really grooving to an unseen song, really giving it all she's got.

Johnny starts giggling. One of the attendants, one of the crisp white ghosts, quick steps over to Janey and sits her back into her chair. She wiggles around on the chair, moving her shoulders, head, and hips. The attendant holds her in place for a moment and whispers something to her. She stops immediately, tightening up.

"Me too," Johnny sighs, "We all took pills. But not me. I didn't want to."

"I never took mine neither."

"Why not?"

I shrug.

"I wanted to feed it to my dog. Just to see what happens," Johnny leans to whisper.

"Yeah, man. I didn't want to take mine. . . Just felt odd. Didn't seem right."

One of the lab coated men walks up and leads some other kid away, through a door up by the card table, into an adjacent room. Another walks up to lead Janey away, and then one steps up to Tommy. This one looks at a notecard, then down at Tommy and says: "Tommy? You're sick. You'll need to come with me. We'll help you to get better."

"I know," Tommy sits there, slumping to his side, staring stubbornly.

"Come on," the lab coat prods.

Tommy grows a mean expression on his face.

"Come on now. . . You want to get better now, don't you? . . . You wanna be just like your classmates, don't you?"

Tommy tightens up.

"Alright, up you go now," the attendant reaches down, grabs both of Tommy's meaty arms, and lifts him to his feet and leads him to the front of the room, to a different doorway than the others. Tommy shuffles with his head down, his shoulders drooped, slouching his way into the other room. The attendant pushes Tommy forward, his arm on Tommy's shoulder, into the other room, then closes the door behind him.

Johnny and I look at one another. We look around the room, to see if we can see anyone else we knew. I look out the windows to see if there is any official looking van or truck or something to give an indication as to who these people are. The huge windows run the entire length of the school, thus offering a good perspective of the entire front of the landscape. But there's nothing out there. Nothing out of the ordinary anyway. Maybe their cars are parked in back, where the teachers park and most of the deliveries are made.

A few more kids are ushered in and take seats. Some of them I recognize, but none I hung out with or knew well. A few I'd never seen before, although they look vaguely familiar. I guess all the kids here look pretty much the same. One of them was quietly taken into the same door Janey was. Two others were lead into the Tommy door. One of the kids stared ahead blankly, with tiny, uninterested dots for eyes. Another kid grinned moronically, as if happy to be finally getting some attention.

As I sit I become more and more uncomfortable, wondering what's going down, what's going to happen to us. So what if I didn't take my stupid pill?

Who cares? Who are they to prescribe anything to me?

Another kid settles in next to me. "Why are you here?" he whispers.

Johnny shrugs.

"Don't know," I squint, "What've you heard?"

"We had some dorky test this morning," he shrug as if to say: 'what gives, man, what's up with that?' in a whisper, "Then, in the afternoon, they took two of us out of class. Marched us down here," the new kid looks around, "They were nice enough about it, but it was like they were 'scary nice' about it. Like too nice. Phony nice. Like they knew something was up. Like they were hiding something. . . Yeah, I don't know. This doesn't feel right."

Johnny looks the new kid over.

"What do you make of it?" I ask.

"They gave us these pills. Before the test."

"Why'd they do that?" Johnny asks.

The new kid just shrugs.

"That why you're here?" I ask, "Because of the pill test?"

The new kid shrugs, looking around, trying to figure things out.

Another kid slides over next to him. We don't recognize him either.

"Yeah, me too," he gulps, "Same here, man. But I didn't take my pill. Didn't look like it tasted real good. . . Why? Did you take your pills?" this second new kid asks, but it's as if he's asking in a strange way, like he asks too nicely, too quickly, or something.

"Oh, sure," I nod, looking him over, "Of course I took my pill. Why wouldn't I? . . It didn't taste funny at all. Not in the least. At least mine didn't. . . I don't think it really had a taste at all, really," I look over to Johnny and squint in curiosity, "How did yours taste?"

"I don't really remember," Johnny shrugs, "I don't think it really had a taste."

"Maybe they gave us the wrong ones?" I look back over to the second new kid, "Or maybe we all got different ones or something. . . Or maybe we all just

react differently to the same ones.”

“Why would we react differently?” the first new kid stares at the floor, trying to find the answer there, “Why wouldn’t we all react the same?”

“They’re probably just going to test our blood or something,” I lean back, “Maybe this is just a random thing, a random sample.”

“Or make us take another test,” Johnny leans back too, “Just to see what happens now. . . See how long the effects last.”

“How many did they take from your class?” the first new kid looks up to me.

“I don’t know,” I shrug, “Seems like they’re just pulling random samples, just to see how we all react,” I look around coolly.

The lab coated men come and go, in and out of the various doors at the front of the room. The nurse at the table continues to sort stacks of papers, files, and notecards.

“Maybe we’re all just having side effects,” the first new kid looks around nervously, “Allergic reactions. . . I hope they don’t give me a shot. . . I hate getting shots.”

“But you all took your pills, right?” the second new kid leans in and prods.

“Oh yeah,” Johnny nods coolly, “Why wouldn’t we?” he shrugs.

“Yeah. I took mine,” I nod, “Everyone did. Everyone I saw, anyway.” Things don’t seem right. That empty numbing feeling sunk in deeper and felt worse, weighing me down. I start feeling all weird inside, like everyone’s watching me, like I don’t know what’s going to happen. I hate that feeling. My knee starts bouncing nervously. My hand starts getting all fidgety.

- part three – flathead -

“We got another flathead!” someone up front calls nervously, as if in a panic.

Our heads snap to the front in curiosity. A kid stumbles out of the door Tommy was led into. But his head is deflating. His head is half the size it should be, the top half drooping and sagging, looking like a stack of flesh-colored pancakes with hair slumping to one side. Slowly he spins out the door like a top,

bumping into the side of the doorway, then staggering backwards. His head looks like an accordion that’s been folded up, obscuring his eyes and nose completely inside folds of skin as if his face were melting, or deflating, leaving just his mouth there, moving around silently, trying to make sounds. His legs are all woozy and noodley, swaying him from side to side. One of his arms is out in front, trying to feel his way. The other arm is feeling the top of his head, wondering what went wrong, his face sagging, squishing up, his chin and jaw now drooping with the rest of his head as if his insides were melting, bones going soggy, the air in him rushing out or something.

“We got another ‘Bad Egg’!” an unseen voice calls from deep inside the other room.

Two attendants are at the front of our room. They freeze for a moment, then rush to the door, each grabbing an arm of the kid and dragging him back into the other room. The kid’s legs twitch, trying to work, trying to walk, trying to stagger, trying to get away.

They scoot him back inside and close the door. One comes out a second later, holding out his arm to us. “Nothing to worry about. Just a bad reaction,” he smiles a stiff grin, “Everything’s fine. Everything’s under control. Nothing to worry about at all. That’s why we’re here. We’ve got an antidote. Everything’ll be back to normal in a minute.” A muffled shriek rings inside the room. The attendant flinches because of it, but resumes his duties at the front of the room, trying to look like nothing’s wrong, like they have things under control. But he is all stiff and uncomfortable now.

We all look at one another, our mouths sucking in air. I go numb and shake my head. Then a bird hits the window, startling us all, knocking us from our momentary stupor.

“Just a bird,” the first new kid shrugs, and we all seem to calm down, sigh in relief. There are no more noises from inside the other room, and things seem to settle back to how they were.

- part four – ‘normal’ -

Then Tommy walks back in through the hallway door we all first came in. It felt like he’d been gone a long time, but maybe he hadn’t. He walks up to us, unattended, and smiles like he’s never smiled before. He looks the same as before, only he’s standing up



straighter. He doesn't look as pudgy. His posture is more assured, more firm, but yet more relaxed, more at ease. His expression is different. He's smiling like he's happy to be here for once.

"Hey guys, how's it goin'?" chirps Tommy, standing before us.

We look him over.

"Tommy. What'd they do to you?" Johnny leans to Tommy, "Where'd they take you?"

"Back there," Tommy beams, gesturing lazily and nonspecifically to the front of the room, "For a while."

"Did you take your pill?" I ask Tommy.

"Which one?" Tommy looks to me, smiling.

"I mean, before. . . ."

"Before . . before the test," the first new kid next to me interrupts.

"Oh, the smart one," Tommy beams.

"Yeah, that one," the first new kid nods.

"Oh yeah, that one went down. All the way down," Tommy smiles as if they told him he did a good job, "Oh wait," he exhales, then looks outside, out the long, tall windows, "I can't remember when I took that one now," he smiles, "Isn't that funny? Why? Did you take yours?"

Johnny and I both nod yes. "Sure. Of course we took ours," I nod. I feel the second new kid beside us looking us over.

"How ya feelin'?" Johnny asks Tommy.

"You take another pill?" I ask.

Tommy looks over to the lab coats in the front, then back to us, "Now I'm just like you," he grins, "Now I'm normal." But there is a lifelessness in his eyes, as if he's not blinking enough, or as much as he should, or something.

"You were always normal," Johnny whispers in disbelief.

"We liked you the way you were," I shrug.

"But now I can play with you. I'm just like you, now," Tommy smiles a vacant grin through a blank stare, "Now I don't worry so much anymore. . . Not like before."

"Hey, we all worry too," I point.

"Not like me," Tommy smiles proudly. "Not like I used to. . . I was the best worrier. . . But worrying is bad. . . Bad for you. . . No good."

"You were always like us," Johnny whispers to himself, looking out the window.

"Now I'm 'Standard'," Tommy turns and walks to the door.

"Have you seen Janey?" I ask, but Tommy just keeps on walking, right out the door.

- part five – how do you feel? -

"Wow. He looks great," the second new kid sits up, "Doesn't he?"

"Ah, yeah. Just divine," Johnny rubs his eye, "Looks like he's havin' himself some fun."

"Ah, yeah. Sure. Looks way more relaxed now," I nod, "Not so stressed."

"Never looked better," Johnny beams.

"Wish I could say the same for myself," I shrug.

"How 'bout you, new kid?" Johnny looks over to the second new one, "Wish you looked that good?"

"That non-blinking stare do it for ya?" I look the second one over, up and down.

"Why? Don't I look good already?" the second new kid looks at us blankly.

"You look fabulous," I glare at him.

"Steeellaaaar," Johnny whispers slowly, in disbelief, really drawing it out.

"Why? How do you want to look?" I look him over.

"How do I look to you?" Johnny asks menacingly, "Don't I look fine?"

I look over at Johnny. "Actually, you do look a little blank. Maybe you should think about smiling vacantly more. . . Maybe not blinking as much."

"Why? How do you feel?" the new kid swallows.

"How do I feel?" Johnny stares ahead, thinking about this a moment, then looks over to me, "How do I

feel?"

I just chuckle.

"How do you feel?" Johnny asks me tenderly, mocking concern.

"Like lemonade," I shrug, "Like a tall glass of cool lemonade. . . Why? How should I feel?"

No one answers.

"Yeah," I look to the front of the room, "Like a tall, cool glass of lemonade on a warm summer afternoon."

"I feel like the underside of a large rock," the first new kids utters, "Like one down by Dabney's creek. All clammy and dank. That's how I feel. . . Why? How do you feel?" he looks at the second one.

"I feel fine," the second one stares, "Just like I'm supposed to feel."

"Say, I've had enough of all this fun. Let's say we all get out of here?" I offer.

"Ah, gee, I'm really not sure we're supposed to do that," the second one looks down, "I think it's best if we all just stay put. Stay right here."

"Yeah?" Johnny looks over to the window, "And just where is 'right here'?"

"'Right here' is wherever you are," the first one looks to the front of the room, thinking, "No matter where you are. There you are."

"So if I'm over there," I search out the windows, "I'm still, in a sense, right here."

"Yeah," Johnny stands, "It's really all a matter in how you look at it."

Right when all the lab coats are gone, all but one, who has his back turned, Johnny and I rush to the front door. We bolt from the room, running down the hall, our book bags swinging heavily at our sides.

- part six – outta there -

"Let's hit the creek," I huff as we chug.

"Naw, man. They'll be looking for us. Let's go back to our rooms. They'll never think to look there," Johnny slows as we turn a corner. He stops, looks down, breathing hard, then slides back to the corner,

peeking around it with just one eye, then back to me, "It'll mess 'em up," he smiles, then quietly peeks back around the corner.

I start to giggle. "Yeah. Like nothing happened."

Johnny looks back to me, "Check it out," he waves me over.

I slink over and crouch, peeking around the corner.

Way at the end of the dark hall, down by the offices at the front of the school, we see them bringing out the kid with the deflated head. He has a large towel over his shoulders where his head should be. But there is just a bump there, like a stack of pancakes, a mere lump under the towel where his head should really be.

We don't hear a thing. An eerie silence hangs in the air. It seems like there should be some sort of sound, some ruffling of clothing, shuffling of feet, muttered voices – but they're so far away, all there is left of them is the quiet. I'm so used to the hallways being full of noises – kids shuffling about their regimented day and all. It's uncomfortable to see it this way, hard to process.

The kid is being ushered away by two of the attendants, one on each side. They pass by the hallway, way down there, looking like they're going to the front door. After they pass, two stretchers follow, each with sheets over them, looking like they're hauling out some dead kids. Two more attendants appear in the hall, looking around, making sure no one sees, making sure all is clear, making sure their lies are covered. They wave out some people. Sure enough, another stretcher comes into view, some clean-cut attendants shuffling it along like the other two. They're followed by another kid with a towel on his head. Again, the towel covers the shoulders, with just a small lump underneath where a head should be. This one shuffles along, being lead away by two more attendants in crisp white lab coats.

We watch for a while longer, but that's all we see. No more other students are led out. The place returns to a calm, dank, hard, forever kind of institutional quiet. We slump down, sitting on the floor, leaning against the lockers. We don't say anything, just stare ahead.

Finally, Johnny sighs, "They reward rote memorization. Obedience," he nods to a trophy case across the hall from our rest, "That's not an achievement."

"They hand out treats to their trained monkeys,"

I exhale, "Each side a ghost who can't think for themselves."

"Free thought dilutes their illusion of power," Johnny slowly climbs to his feet, scanning the hall each way, "Free thought is a threat to their cake."

"What treasures can you extract from a rat maze? A glorified prison." I wonder.

"You're pretty fast, know that?" whispers Johnny, still scanning the halls.

"I fart skittles and belch rainbows," I search the halls as well.

"Yeah," Johnny takes in a large gulp of air, looking around, "That'll work."

I sigh, then join him, climbing to my feet. Calmly we walk back to our respective rooms, without a sound, the hallways cold and empty, as if the place's deserted, or like it's Saturday afternoon or something. When I get to my room I just stand and wait.

"Later," Johnny whispers, walking on, down to his room. When he gets there he stops, looks at the door a moment, then turns back to me. I look down at him, reach for the door and open it. He reaches for his. I smile and step inside my room, the dark of the hall interrupted by the light flooding in from the large windows.

I step inside.

All the students stop and look up as they hear the door open and close. The teacher is at her desk. She looks up. I look everyone over, noticing Tommy is back at his desk, sitting straight and beaming in anticipation at whatever is to happen next. I study him a moment, wondering if he's really better off, happier.

"Oh," the teacher squints, "You're back," as if she didn't expect to ever see me again.

"Yeah, they sent a couple of us back," I shrug, looking around, "I was expecting a surprise party or something, but hey, this eerie silence is nice too. . . Thanks for the warm fuzzy. Good to see you too."

The other kids look up at the teacher, then back over to me, as if they need to be assigned what to think.

"Why? Weren't you expecting me?" I inhale strongly, straightening up.

The teacher leans back in her chair, "Ah, no. Nothing like that," she looks me over with a serious face, then

smiles an odd smile.

I look around the room, "Yeah, it's the lying I missed the most," I nod, then start back to the aisle that my desk is down.

The kids next to me look down and squint, as if thinking about all this, about what happened, what they did to me, since I basically looked the same as I always had. But they seemed surprised to see me back. There was a vibe in the air. Others tried to look disinterested, returning to their paperwork, their busy work, their silly business.

Out the window I see a white van lined up at the curb. It has no windows. Several kids are lined up beside it, each being ushered in. There is one of the lab coat guys with his arm out, leading them in, then another one, beside him, with a clipboard.

Janey is in line. The others are standing still, looking down, or looking away, searching the school. One kid has on mismatched clothes – plaids with stripes, and colors that don't go. Another kid has a big messy frizz of hair. Another kid is one I see in the library all the time, off in a corner alone, head buried in a book. Another is this freaky math kid I used to see sitting in the hallway, head down in a math text all the time. Yeah, this group really seemed to stand out from the great unwashed pack.

Janey began doing her little standing-still boogie – bending at the knees and popping up and wiggling her shoulders and hips, nodding her head to a tune only she can identify, one only she knows. And suddenly I wished I knew that song, wished I would've asked her to hum it out loud to me, wished I knew her better, wished I'd've been nicer to her. Not that I was mean to her, I just never really went out of my way to get to know her. But now, seeing her like this, she looks so funny and interesting, bobbing up and down while the other kids stand so still. She looks like she didn't care. She looks . . . fearless.

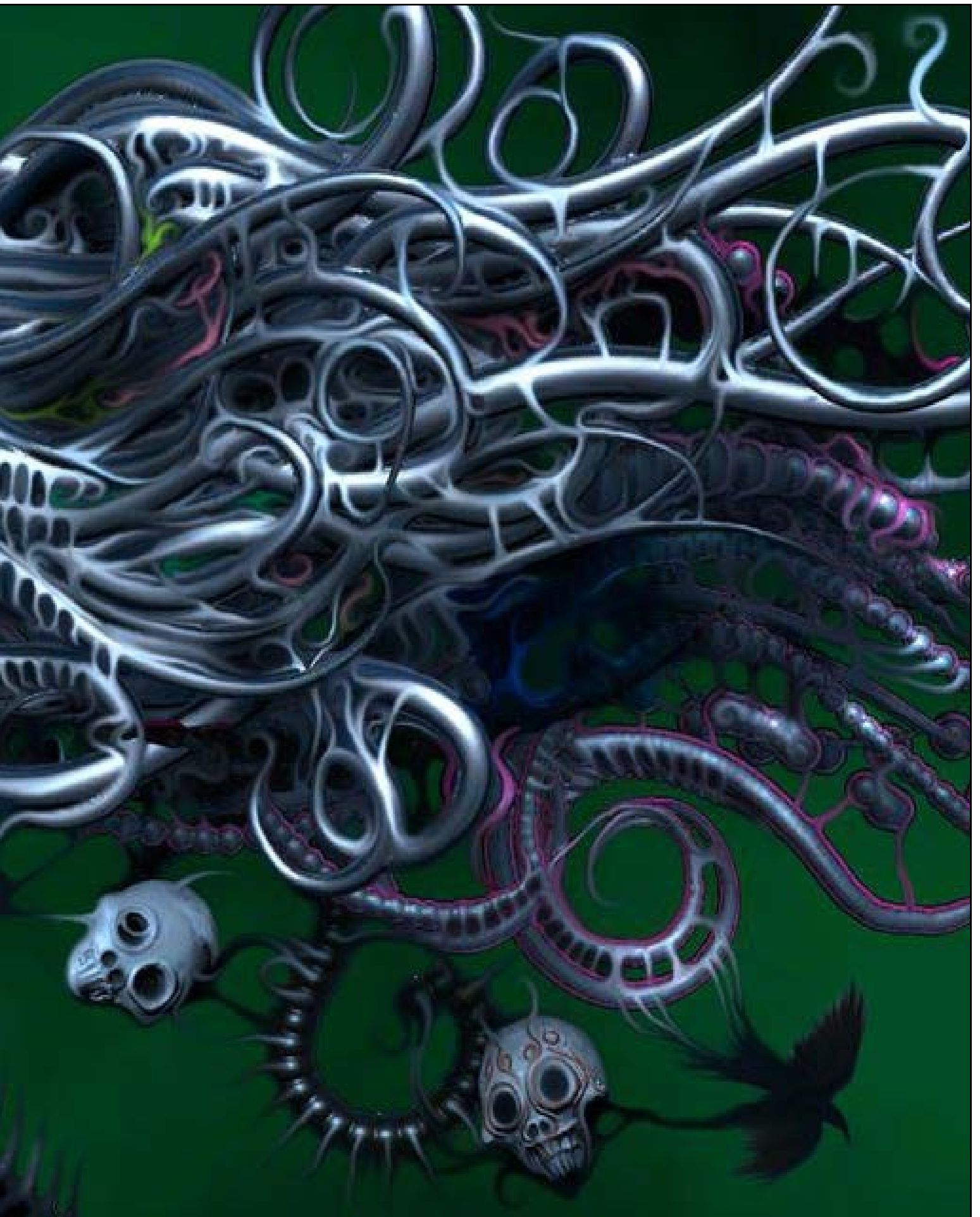
Then I see that second new kid walk out there, to the van, from the front of the school. I stop at my desk, rehang my book bag on the back of my chair, look over to the teacher at the front of the room, reading a book behind her desk, then back to the van outside. The new kid walks up to the other lab coats out there. He's also carrying a clipboard. He stands next to one of the lab coat guys, looks over his clipboard, then up at the kids in line. Then, as if he senses something, he looks over to my room, over to me. I'm sure he sees me as I'm standing up and we're not blotted out in the sun.

I watch him, then point to him, indicating that I know who he is, what he's up to, that I know his game and can identify it any time I want. I look to the teacher. She's still heads down in a book. I look back to that second new kid outside. I raise my arms, make a fist and gesture it slowly into my other palm above my head so it is clear to see, indicating I'll pound him good if I ever see him again. Then I reach over, without taking my eyes off him, and reach into the book bag belonging to the girl who sits in front of me. She brought a puppet to school for a different class. I pull the puppet from her bag hanging on the back of her chair, slide it on my hand, raise the hand, point to it, then point out the window to him, to indicate that he is a puppet. I hold the puppet up high, pointing back at the puppet, then out to the kid again as I nod my head dramatically, as if to say, 'yep, kid, this is you, you're the puppet'. Then I raise my hand and pretend to strangle the puppet, never taking my eyes from the kid, smiling, grinning, nodding. Then I slowly descend to my seat. I hear some birds fly overhead. I put my hand up to my ear, as if to indicate that I am listening to them. I point outside to them, nodding dramatically, then point to my head, to indicate that I am free. I am free. My mind is free. Free and clear.

Periodically you have to let them know. You have to remind them – you are free. You are free. You are free. You are free. You are free. You are free.











# Sweet Family

by WOL-vrley

“Say hello to Fluffy, Daddy.”

Wayne turned to smile at his six year old daughter and her pet rabbit. He tousled her ginger-colored hair fondly.

“Not now, sweetie. Us Mets are playing the Cubs and we’re gonna win.”

He turned back to watch the game, his blue eyes focused and intent on the action. Lucy sat beside him on the sofa petting her rabbit. She wondered what grown-ups found so fascinating in baseball; rabbits were much more fun.

Wayne glared at the TV. Hell, no! That idiot Howard had just screwed up again. Dammit! What use is a fucking fielder who can’t catch a simple ball?

Now it was down to the Mets’ MVP, Carlo Rodriguez, to keep them in the game.

Wayne watched with rapt attention as Carlo strode out to the plate, bat swinging beside him like the pendulum of a grandfather clock counting down to the other team’s defeat.

“Go kill ‘em, dude,” Wayne growled.

“Daddy,” Lucy called.

Wayne didn’t hear her. Marlon James, the Cubs’ new import from the Houston Raiders had just gotten up on the pitcher’s mound. Wayne’s heart leapt in his chest. Suddenly this didn’t look good. This guy could pitch.

Marlon looked at Carlo, then he pointedly spat and ground it under his shoe.

Carlo smirked back. “Throw the damn ball, sucker” he mouthed at Marlon.

Marlon pitched the ball.

Wayne watched it travel in slow motion. He watched Carlo swing the bat, then turn in surprise when he missed and the ball ended up in the catcher’s mitt.

Strike one!” the umpire called.

“Daddy,” Lucy said again.

Strike two!” the umpire called. Wayne saw a smirk on the man’s face, like he had personal beef with the Mets.

“Daddy,” Lucy said again, now tugging Wayne’s sleeve, “Why does Fluffy—”

“Not now, baby,” he said sharply, shrugging her off. Wayne’s mouth was dry, his muscles tense. He mentally willed Carlo to hit the third ball, to smash it out of the stadium and up beyond orbit to where God Almighty alone would be able to catch it.

Do it, do it, just one hit, and we’re still in the game. Do i—

Amazingly, Carlo missed again.

“Strike three!”

Wayne lost it. He leapt to his feet. “You good-for-nothing piece of shit! And we’re paying you eight million dollars a fucking year!? For fucking what!? Get your Latino ass off the fucking field, slacker! Damn! We ought to deport you back to Cuba! Shit! Shit!! Shit!!!”

He advanced menacingly on the TV set, then, at the last moment, resisted the urge to kick its screen in.

Lucy watched him with great amusement, her question momentarily forgotten. She stroked Fluffy’s fur. She thought Daddy looked fantastic jumping about like this—like her favorite Cynthia Chaos doll.

Her mother Grace appeared in the doorway. “Wayne,



I've told you to stop swearing in front of our daughter. It's bad education for her."

Grace was a carrot top like her daughter. Plump, pretty, perky, and currently pissed-off at her husband.

Wayne simmered down. He grinned embarrassedly. "We lost again. Can't this team do anything right? I mean, how're we gonna win the World Series if we can't even beat the Chicago Cubs?"

"They should never have bought that lout Rodriguez," Grace retorted. "I watched on 'E' that he's cheating on his girlfriend." She spun on her heel and returned to making dinner.

Wayne sat back down. This was a depressing loss. He needed cheering up.

He channel-surfed till he found WWE Vintage Collection. He relaxed back, watching an old Sting vs. Booker-T Match. Yeah, this was much better—wrestling was the thing. Always reliable, no jerks like Carlo Rodriguez, an MVP who couldn't hit a crucial home run.

"Daddy?" Lucy said.

Wayne now remembered she'd been trying to get his attention during the horrible ball game.

He turned and smiled at her. "Yes, sweetie?

"Daddy, Fluffy's eyes look funny. What's wrong with them?"

Wayne looked at the rabbit. Lucy was right. Fluffy's pink eyes were bulging out of its head like they'd pop out.

He took Fluffy from her. "I'm not sure, sweetie, I'll have to take him to . . . Yeooooooooowwww!"

Wayne dropped the rabbit and leapt to his feet. Onscreen, Sting had just delivered a scorpion death drop on Booker-T.

Wayne was however oblivious to the stinger's victory. He was staring in disbelief at the deep bite in his hand.

"Shit! Fuckkkkkk! SheeeiiiTTT!" he screamed at the top of his voice.

Grace immediately reappeared in the doorway.

"Wayne, for God's sake stop swearing!"

Wayne held his palm out for her inspection, letting her see the deep gash in it. "Our daughter's fucking rabbit just bit me!"

"Stop fucking swearing!" she thundered back. "You're corrupting our fucking kid! And what the hell are you even making a fuss about, you dickhead? You're not even bleeding!!!"

She calmed, smiled sweetly, and added: "Maybe Fluffy is hungry."

Grace smiled at their daughter. Lucy was now gripping her retrieved rabbit tight, scared her father might kill it in retaliation. "Come into the kitchen, baby. I'll get Fluffy some radishes."

Lucy hastened away after her mother.

II

Wayne sat down again. He was very bothered.

Grace was right: His hand wasn't bleeding. And it should be.

The rabbit had bitten deep into the meat of Wayne's palm, but the wound—though gaping like Grace's vagina did when he pulled out after they made love—was empty.

It was as bloodless as a cut in a side of beef—raw lifeless flesh.

Oh, yes, it fucking HURT, but . . .

Wayne stuck a tentative finger into the wound. It came away cold. Freezing.

What the hell is this? he wondered. Rabbits don't bite people, and people bleed, and we're hot inside, not cold . . .

Onscreen, Eddie Guerrero and Chris Benoit were wrestling hard. Eddie launched himself through the air for a frog splash, but Chris got his knees up in time. Eddie rolled over onto his back, clutching his belly and grunting like a pig. Chris tried to pin him. Eddie got a foot on the ropes at two.

Yeah, Wayne thought, those two dead guys could fight.

A jab of pain reminded him about his hand.

Then the onscreen picture changed. The wrestling match was replaced with the image of a pretty blonde's head.

Wayne gaped. "What . . . ?" He forgot both his pain and chagrin. But I didn't touch the remote, he thought.

"Hello, Wayne," the onscreen blonde said.

He gaped at her. "You talking to me? And how do you know my name?"

He looked around quickly to ensure that neither Grace nor Lucy was witnessing this. "What's going on? "Who are you?"

"Don't be alarmed, Wayne" she replied. "My name is Tiffany Twisted." She smiled. "Now, to answer your first question: You're a research test zombie. Now go and eat your wife's brains."

Wayne was about telling Tiffany Twisted to go fellate a turd, when he felt a 'control switch' flick 'on' in his mind.

Suddenly he was powerless to resist her instructions.

"Go and eat Grace's brains," Tiffany repeated.

"Yes," Wayne said, "that sounds like a great idea."

He got up and walked into the kitchen.

### III

Lucy was nowhere in sight. Wayne was glad. It meant she wouldn't witness him kill her mother.

Lucy's rabbit, however, was in the kitchen. It was perched on top of the fridge. Both its eyes had now popped out, revealing camera lenses that tracked Wayne's every move.

Grace, checking the chicken she was deep frying, had her back to Wayne. He padded over and picked a knife off the wall rack. Then he padded over to Grace.

He kissed Grace on the neck.

She tingled. "I love you too, baby, but later, when Lucy's gone to bed."

"There won't be a later," Wayne said.

He quickly slit Grace's throat, parting her white skin like she was a chicken.

He leapt back as her blood began spraying everywhere. It splashed into the open deep fryer, making the oil sputter.

Grace turned and gaped at him. "Wha . . . wha . . . ? She staggered towards Wayne, her arms clutching her neck. Then she slipped on her own blood and crashed to the floor.

She twitched twice and died.

Fluffy leapt down from the fridge to the floor. The rabbit began licking up Grace's blood.

Tiffany Twisted's voice came loud and clear from the living room. "Now cut off her head and open it up, Wayne."

Wayne shooed Fluffy away. He sawed Grace's head off her body with his knife, then got a cleaver from the knife rack and chopped off the top of her head.

Then he stood and stared in surprise at Grace's 'brain.'

Rather than being pale white meat, it was a deep dark brown, with its surface split in brick-like divisions like a wall.

Now this is odd, Wayne thought. Why do Grace's brains look and smell like chocolate. And are those light brown things hazelnuts?

"She's part of a new product line I'm developing, Wayne," Tiffany said. "It's called 'Sweet Family'. Now eat, eat, eat."

Wayne carried Grace's head back to the living room. He sat back down on the sofa and ate her chocolate brain.

"It tastes great," he said.

"There's greater still to come," Tiffany said.

Fluffy had followed Wayne into the living room. He threw it Grace's empty head. The rabbit proceeded to eat the meat off her cheeks.

Except for its camera-eyes, the rabbit was now red all over.

Shit, Wayne thought, Lucy will throw a fit if she sees her rabbit now.

On cue, Lucy walked into the living room.

"Have you seen Fluffy, Dad—?"

She froze on seeing that her rabbit was eating her mother's head.

Lucy picked a newspaper and advanced on Fluffy.

She began smacking it with the paper. "Bad, bad, bunny. Don't you dare eat mummy!"

Fluffy reared up on its hind legs. It roared like a lion at Lucy, baring bloodstained incisors at her. Then, it batted the newspaper out of her hand.

Lucy forgot about scolding it, sniffing in fear, she ran and held Wayne. "Daddy, Fluffy is—"

"Hello, Lucy," Tiffany Twisted said.

Lucy turned to gape at the TV, then she turned to Wayne. "Daddy . . . ?"

Tiffany smiled at Wayne. "Your daughter tastes even better than her mother. Eat her brain also."

Lucy began crying. "Daddy, I'm scared," she wept. "The woman in the TV is talking to us." Her fear was replaced with concern. "And you're covered in red. Did Fluffy bite you?"

"Don't worry, sweetie," Wayne said. "Everything is just fine." He kissed her on the cheek, then pointed to Tiffany. "Don't be afraid of the TV woman. She's a friend."

He got up and walked into the kitchen to get the knife and cleaver. Then he came back out and killed his daughter and cut off her head.

Lucy's head was packed full of strawberry sponge cake. Wayne dug some out with his fingers.

"You're right," he told Tiffany after chewing a mouthful. "She does taste better than Grace."

Wayne noticed Fluffy looking at him hungrily as he finished off Lucy's head cake. "Uh, uh, not fucking sharing."

"There's more in her belly," Tiffany said.

Wayne raised an eyebrow in surprise. He slit Lucy's belly open also, cutting through her skin from below her ribcage to above her panties' waistband.

Tiffany was right. Lucy's belly was packed full of sponge cake also. Strawberry and chocolate with almonds and raisins. It had icing shaped like intestines. It smelt heavenly.

Wayne grinned broadly at Fluffy. He cut out a large chunk of tummy-cake and threw it at the rabbit. "Here, have some too. I was wrong. There's more than enough for both of us."

IV

"And now," Tiffany said, beaming. "Are you ready for dessert, Wayne?"

Wayne nodded enthusiastically. He hadn't finished all the cake inside Lucy, but . . .

"Good, Tiffany said. "I am too."

Fluffy now lay on its side on the floor, too full of cake and meat to stand upright. The rabbit had also had eaten all the flesh off both Lucy's and Grace's heads.

Tiffany climbed out of the television. She was tall, thin, and butt-naked as sin. Her nipples were cherries.

Wayne gaped at her in surprise.

Tiffany's left hand was a HUGE metal cleaver that reached down to the floor. The cleaver wasn't an attachment—it continued seamlessly with her flesh.

Her right hand was a similarly monstrous silver spoon that dragged on the carpet as she walked.

Wayne watched her cross the living room to him. She really needs to eat more to stop her ribs sticking out, he thought

Tiffany reached Wayne and stopped.

"And now for desert," she said.

Wayne couldn't wait. "Yes, yes, yes!" he enthused, "Give it to me."

Tiffany turned and looked at Fluffy for a moment. She shook her head in disgust. "That surveillance model needs way more development."

Wayne grew impatient. He supposed Tiffany would break open Fluffy's stupid little head and reveal its brains to be—

Tiffany turned back to him. Without warning, she slammed her cleaver hand down smack on his head.

Wayne's head spit open like an pear. Tiffany forced the cleaver down through his neck into his chest. Then she twisted it sharply.

Wayne broke apart. Into left and right halves full of . . .

"You're my Ice Cream Man, Wayne," Tiffany said, her voice full of excitement. "Just perfect, perfect."

Tiffany sat down on the sofa. She began eating the

vanilla ice cream out of Wayne's body, scooping it out with her spoon hand.

Wayne's split head was full of caramel syrup. Tiffany smeared it all over his ice cream to make him really tasty.

After a while, she noticed Fluffy eyeing Wayne hungrily.

"Uh, uh," she told it, "This is all mine. You'll bust at the seams if you have any more."

Then she relented and scooped two large helpings of vanilla ice into Grace and Lucy's braincases for the rabbit to eat.





<http://straechav.deviantart.com/>

# THE GOLEM AND THE LITTLE THINKING POCKET WATCH

S.T. CARTLEDGE

The golem and the little thinking pocket watch sat on the beach, watching the suburban apocalypse unfold.

Sirens wailed into the night as wave after ocean wave crashed up on the beach.

They were two of a kind, creatures not of this world, yet there they were, together. The golem looked up at the stars and imagined a world far away, full of golems like him, made from all sorts of things moulded into rough human-shapes and given names a little more imaginative than 'Granite'.

The pocket watch, however, preferred not to think in terms of 'worlds' or 'spaces'. He was strictly fourth-dimensional, acting only as a witness of the linear progression of time, as Granite was a witness of place. The pocket watch called himself Tick to help Granite comprehend him in real-world terms. Granite pulled off his face, set it on the sand beside him and thought about all the things he would never fully understand.

Tom and Wendy had fly-heads. Every second Sunday of the month they threw a neighbourhood barbecue. They set out long trestle tables and filled them with cling-wrapped salads, coleslaws, potato bakes, and baskets of warm bread rolls. There were tubs of butter, rows of condiments, piles of plastic cutlery, and neat stacks of paper plates and napkins, weighed down by ornamental wooden ducks so they wouldn't blow away in the afternoon breeze.

When the guests arrived, Tom got the barbecue fired up. He flipped burgers and held Wendy's hand in his non-spatula hand. He and Wendy made small talk with the Browns from across the street. The Martins had brought their thirteen year old son, Scott, and eight year

old daughter, Britney. Vivienne Martin had her four month old daughter cradled in her arms, suckling on a pendulous breast. Vivienne's dark hair fell over her purple sweater and her pale white skin had a soft glow to it. She drank a glass of lemonade and told the Vaughns that baby Chloe Jane Martin was the cutest the doctor had ever seen.

Tom made a burger and passed it to Granite, who didn't know what to do with it. He sat down on the grass beneath a tree and picked it apart and put it back together. The cheese was glued to the top bun, so he put the onion on the bottom, then the bacon, then beef, tomato, chicken, pickle, pork, pineapple, egg, lettuce, then the crab patty. So many layers, so many possibilities. Granite took the burger apart again, and tried a different combination. Tom was famous in the area for his twenty-stacker burgers. He stared at Granite, buzzing under his breath when the golem showed no inclination towards eating the burger.

Wendy rubbed Tom's shoulders and said, "let it go, honey-buzz. Everyone's having a good time. Let's not get the burger police involved."

The 'burger police' was her name for Tom when he was grumpy at these events. He sighed and flipped an egg and a crab patty and tilted his head so he could kiss Wendy on her proboscis. She was right, of course. He didn't want to shake things up just because the golem didn't know how to eat a damn burger. After all, it was the implication of safety and privacy that made their neighbourhood such a wonderful place to live.

A topiary shrub-kitten ran and jumped at butterflies, darting between the guests' legs and under the tables. It danced around the Martin and Fitzroy kids, circling them a few times while they played catch with

tennis ball cannons on their heads and velcro pads strapped to their chests. The shrub-kitten stopped and purred and mewed and rubbed its head along Vivienne's soft, milk-smooth legs. The kitten's leaves tickled playfully on her calves while she bounced baby Chloe on her knee. With a flick of its tail, the kitten darted over to Granite and rubbed its leafy back against his legs, then it started using his legs as scratching posts, sharpening its twig-claws.

Granite pushed the kitten tumbling away and it just bounced right back and resumed its scratching. He pushed it again and it mewed and came galloping back like it was playing a game. The kitten stretched and rustled its face right down into the grass and propped its bum high in the air. It rustled lower, its two beady beetle-eyes twinkling up at Granite. The kitten wagged its bum and crouched lower like a lion in the wilderness, camouflaged with the grass. Granite grabbed the kitten by the face. It hissed and whined like a choking lawnmower and dug its claws into the ground, trying to jerk its head back. Granite grabbed the kitten's hind legs, lifted it up and ripped it in half.

Sap spurted out in great violent arcs. The neighbourhood stopped enjoying the barbecue and stared at Granite. The neighbourhood disappeared into Tom's garden shed in the corner of the yard and returned with sinister pitchforks and flaming blue torches. While the shrub-kitten's torso dragged itself away with a series of pitiful mews, the neighbourhood cornered Granite and slipped a sausage-link noose over his neck and hung him from the old oak tree where their children had previously been playing their invisible games.

Now, the kids raced around the yard in petrol powered shopping carts while the grown-ups flung hamburgers at Granite.

"You're a monster!" the neighbourhood said. "So ugly! Kill it!"

A crab-meat burger slapped Granite on the face and baby Chloe started crying. The neighbourhood started crying with her, crying and throwing burgers and insults. The kids crashed their shopping carts into each other. The twisted metal from the carts went through Scott's face, through Lucy's shoulder and leg, and another piece went

through Britney's spine. The twisted metal dug into the ground and sprung up, flinging Britney up in the air like a mutant pole-vaulter stuck upside down mid-jump.

Tom walked up to Granite with a knife and stabbed him. The knife broke and Tom broke down, sobbing and saying something about the kitten being like a daughter to him. But the little kitten was still alive, still pulling its top half across the yard slowly towards the bleeding children.

Wendy walked up to Granite with a sledgehammer and smacked it against the side of his head. The sledgehammer broke. Wendy brushed her fingers through Tom's bristly black hair and draped her arms across his shoulders. The neighbourhood walked up to Granite with an axe and swung it down between his eyes, like splitting wood. The axe handle splintered and the axe head flew off and chopped four of the neighbourhood's toes off and left one piggy hanging.

The neighbourhood sliced at Granite with a katana and threw the broken sword in a pile with the knife, sledgehammer, and axe handle. Vivienne came at Granite with a power drill. It sparked and blunted and the motor started smoking before it whined to a halt. The Browns held a chainsaw up to Granite's waist and let it rip. The machine coughed and sputtered, bits of the blade breaking off and embedding in the neighbourhood's faces. Granite hung from the sausage-link noose, trying to read all the faces of the neighbourhood, scanning for sympathy. The chainsaw choked and died and joined the broken pile. The neighbourhood filtered out once it had taken its turn to deal its punishment on Granite. Then there was a small line left still trying to put a chip in the golem.

Last in the line was Violet, the neighbourhood panda, wielding a petrol-powered saw. She hacked into Granite's side for a couple of minutes. The smoke from the saw was putrid and black, and the machine jerked and bucked. The blade came loose and sliced through the remainder of the neighbourhood before lodging itself in the brickwork. The petrol saw joined the pile of broken tools. Violet growled and bit off Tom's leg and took off running down the street.

Tom looked up at Granite and said, "you're the

worst neighbour ever!”

Tick stared at Granite. How big and shiny his nose was, his mouth hung low, eyebrows furrowed. His face appeared to be sinking.

“What’s eating you?” Tick said.

Granite sniffed and rubbed his nose with his big hulk hands. “I didn’t know what the kitten was,” he said.

It looked like twigs and leaves. Just like how Tom and Wendy looked like flesh and hair on the outside, and organs, muscle, blood and bones on the inside. After Violet ran off with Tom’s leg, Granite stared at the bloody stump, covered in dirt and grass and bits of burger. Tom wouldn’t stop crying. Granite pulled himself out of his sausage noose and picked Tom up by the stump. He wasn’t entirely sure what Tom was – that creepy fly head – but he didn’t like the way Tom cried and squirmed. Granite only wanted to have a closer look at the stump. He felt Tom’s flesh and brushed his fingers over Tom’s fly-face.

“You’re a monster!” Tom said, veins pulsing from his upside down forehead.

Granite frowned and put Tom on the ground. Tom threw a rock at Granite’s head.

“Monster!” he yelled, panting real heavy.

Granite turned to walk away when the broken axe head whizzed past him, grazing his shoulder. Tom picked up a bit of broken metal and cocked his arm back to toss it at Granite.

“Leave now,” he said. “And never come back.”

Behind Tom, Wendy grew small and afraid. Granite grabbed Tom by the ankle of his good leg and slipped his foot into the sausage noose. Then, he ran away.

“What’s eating you?” Tick said.

“If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t have killed that kitten,” Granite said.

“You don’t want to go back in time.”

“Why not?”

“There are two schools of thought on this,” Tick said. “The first is that when you go back in time, your memories and experiences beyond that point cease to exist, like they’ve been rewound. You would have no recollection of your future self and the guilt of killing the kitten. You would arrive at the point that you want to change and your instinct would be to do the exact same thing that you did the first time around. You were always going to kill the kitten.”

Golem dug his toes into the sand.

“The second,” Tick said, “is that changing the past is a power that no living being should have. There are too many other factors to consider outside of your own emotions. If you were to go back in time, knowing what you know now, and you didn’t kill the kitten, you would still have the knowledge that in an alternate reality you *did* kill the kitten, and by your desire to change the past, you have altered history and obscured this fact from everyone it impacts. It could be that not killing the kitten would have made the world a better place, but who has the right to say that? If everyone could travel through time, who would use it? And for what reasons? What justifies the cause to mess with temporality? If you were to change the past, the guilt of killing the kitten and covering it up by bringing it back to life would eat at you far worse than how you feel now. You were meant to kill the kitten. That’s just the way it is. How people react to that is up to them to decide.”

“Hmm,” Granite said.

“We were not meant for this world,” Tick said.

Sirens wailed into the night as wave after ocean wave crashed up on the beach.

Granite pulled off his face, set it on the sand beside him and thought about all the things he would never fully understand.





# CONFERENCE

BY TIM WAGGONER

The Professor sighs and tosses the manuscript, pages bloody with red ink, onto his desk. The student looks at the manuscript, a pained expression on his face, but doesn't move to pick it up. The desk is fashioned from the skull of some titanic beast, teeth large as knives, horns stretching all the way to the ceiling. The chair he's sitting in is made from barbed wire, and it's uncomfortable against his bare scales, but he does his best to ignore the pain.

"Tell me, Gavin," the Professor says wearily, "what is the theme of your story?"

The student stares at the greenish flames the Professor has in place of eyebrows. The way they dance and waver is . . . hypnotic.

The Professor snaps his clawed fingers, and the student is brought back to attention.

"The theme?" the Professor prompts.

"Umm . . ." The student looks around the office, takes in the various bladed weapons mounted on the walls, along with the flayed skins of past students who failed to live up to the Professor's expectations. Needless to say, he doesn't find much comfort in any of the objects. Especially the skins. "A man is walking in the woods at night. He encounters a psychotic killer with an ax. He tries to get away, but the killer catches him, chops off his head, and adds it to his collection of body parts."

The Professor sighs again. "That's a summary of your story, Gavin. I'm asking you what the theme is."

Gavin's tail swishes as he thinks. "Stay out of the woods at night?"

The Professor's brow flames blaze higher, but his yellowish goat eyes grow cold. "Tell me, Gavin: what sort of stories are we learning to write in our class?"

"Horror stories."

"And do you recall what I said about such stories on the first day of class?"

"That the oldest and simplest horror story is the predator and prey story?"

"And what did I say about such stories?"

"That they're, uh, not good."

"I said that truly effective horror depends on the audience not knowing what's going to happen. There are only three outcomes of predator and prey stories. Either the predator catches its prey, the prey escapes, or the prey turns the tables on the predator. Regardless of which ending occurs, it's one that's already known to the audience, therefore rendering the tale ineffective. And your story, Gavin, concludes with the simplest ending to such a story: the predator wins."

"So would it be better if I have the man kill the ax murderer at the end? Maybe I could have the man collect the murderer's head! That would be a twist, right?"

"The only twist that's occurring right now is the twist of nausea in my three stomachs," the Professor mutters. "For the moment, let us set aside the clichéd scenario of your tale – I mean really, Gavin, an ax murderer? – and concentrate on the ending. Even a story as basic as predator/prey can be made fresh by a judicious application of creativity. A trait which, up to this point, I've seen you demonstrate precious little of."

Frustrated, the student chews the inside of his cheeks with teeth sharp as razors.

The Professor leans back in his chair – which, the student notes, is made from tanned hide suspiciously similar to the skins hanging on the walls

– and strokes his chin spikes with long tentacled fingers. “Perhaps you could employ an alternative point of view in the story. Say, that of the ax. And to add an extra level of conflict, you could make the ax despise killing and somehow attempt to prevent its master from carrying out his grisly work. Imagine the ending that might result from such a drastic change.”

The Professor’s goat eyes, which had been looking toward the ceiling as he spoke, lower to regard the student.

“Shouldn’t you be taking notes?”

The student tenses his index finger to extend the claw further and begins carving letters into his scaled hide. The Professor continues to speak, effortlessly tossing out ideas for different ways to end the student’s story, each one more interesting than the last. When he’s finished, his entire body is covered with bleeding words. He’s now as red as the manuscript lying atop the Professor’s desk.

The Professor looks at the student and smiles, revealing the tiny gravestones that are his teeth. The student squints, and is just able to make out the names chiseled into their surfaces. One of the names is his.

“Of course, you can’t use any of my ideas. That would be plagiarism. But I hope my examples inspire you to strive all the harder next time. You may go.” He glances at the manuscript, and his upper lip curls in distaste. “And take that abomination with you.”

Bleeding and in pain, the student stands, reaches for his manuscript, then hesitates.

“So what happens now?” he asks. “Does your desk come to life and eat me? Do you grab hold of me, flay the skin from my body, and hang it on the wall with the others? Or do I snap and, sickened by the abuse you’ve heaped on me, snatch one of the weapons off the wall, kill you with it, and then start writing a new story using your blood for ink?”

The Professor smiles again, wider this time. “It’s your story, Gavin. What’s the most frightening and disturbing ending you can think of?”

The student mulls this over for several moments before answering.

“The next story I write will be told in first person – and at the end it’s revealed that the narrator was dead . . . all . . . along.” He grins. “See you in class, Professor.”

The student departs, shutting the office door behind him, and walks down the hall, accompanied by delicious sounds of the Professor’s screams.

Tim Waggoner’s recent releases are the short story collection *Bone Whispers*, and the tie-in novel *Supernatural: Carved in Flesh*. Overall, he’s published over thirty novels, three collections, and 100 stories. He teaches creative writing at Sinclair Community College and in Seton Hill University’s MFA in Writing Popular Fiction program. His novella “The Men Upstairs” was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award in the Long Fiction category. You can find him on the web at [www.timwaggoner.com](http://www.timwaggoner.com).



<https://www.facebook.com/TheFunhouseHaunt>





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# Spam Penguins

## by Lee Widener

He was about ready to give up. He'd been trying to write a story about penguins made of Spam, hunting pineapples disguised as Una O'Connor for hours, but it just wasn't coming. If he couldn't write this story and submit it by the end of the day his reputation as a writer would be ruined. He'd been cranking out stories for the past ten years and had finally garnered an assignment from Dark Heart of the Ill-Behaved Kumquat Magazine. He'd made it. Only true elite authors were invited to submit to Dark Heart of the Ill-Behaved Kumquat Magazine. His career would be made.

Only, the story wouldn't come. He opened his desk drawer to check on his volcano. It was puffing away just as it should, sending ash into the air. He tickled the mini-mountain and a cave opened up in the side. A tiny girl was chained in the cave.

"How's everything today?" he asked.

The girl sat up and clutched at her throat. Oh dear, she still couldn't talk. He slid the drawer shut and stared at the computer screen. Penguins... Spam penguins that hunted pineapple... He got nothing. They just wouldn't do anything.

In frustration he stared out the window at the orange sky filled with bloody dog teeth. He knew that soon the army of mutant South American beaver lizards would appear over the beersnuff hill, seeking retribution for the unfortunate egg revolution of the year before.

Why couldn't he come up with a decent Una O'Connor pineapple joke today? What a time to get writer's block. Without this story credit he'd never be accepted as a true writer, and that was his one desire.

He leaned back in his office chair and slipped off the plastic runner into the river that flowed beneath his desk. Little puffing werecigarettes and screaming killer nun habits swarmed after him, but they weren't fast enough to catch him as he floated downstream.

From the riverbank a five story tall, naked, obese Marilyn Monroe with a huge yellow latex glove for a head leaned over and picked him up.

The giant glove wrapped itself around him, making it impossible to breathe. He felt himself suffocating, the air forced from his lungs like every idea had been forced from his mind today. Now he was in danger of having his very life squeezed from him. The glove squeezed harder and blood rushed to his head. His vision blurred.

"Marilyn!" he shouted. "Please don't kill me! I know I made some snide remarks about your acting talent in a story, but I secretly adore and love you! Bus Stop is one of my favorite movies!"

Giant obese Marilyn threw him into a vagina at the mouth of the river. The vagina closed and he was trapped. He heard strange noises – clanking, buzzing, twittering noises – and then he was surrounded by a multitude of odd characters – ambulatory toasters, squirrels turned inside out, fried mayonnaise gods, emasculated starfish, and yes – Spam penguins.

"My lovely Spam penguins, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"We're all misfit ideas," they answered. "This is where unused ideas go. We're waiting to be born. We're waiting for YOU to make us real."

"I say we kill him right here," the ambulatory toasters said.

"Kill..." repeated the inside out squirrels.

"No! We shall not kill today!" the fried mayonnaise gods shouted. "We shall have a trial by ordeal. Bring the prisoner to the precipice!"

The emasculated starfish grabbed him and carried him to the edge of a cliff overlooking a five thousand foot tall mountain. At the bottom was a pool of bubbling lava, belching flames.

“Release the Revelator!” the fried mayonnaise gods demanded.

A steel cage opened and a terrifying beast slithered forward. It was a gigantic tongue with six writhing tentacles oozing a sticky goo. As it crawled, the ground dissolved beneath it.

“You have a choice!” the fried mayonnaise gods announced. “Face the Revelator or jump into the Pit of Creativity!”

He stared at the hideous monster inching toward him. That choice would result in certain death. He glanced over the edge of the cliff and trembled. He was afraid of heights. That way led to possible failure. What if he fell into the Pit of Creativity and still couldn’t finish his story? Failure he’d have to live with the rest of his life. A swift and merciful end--or a lifetime of mental torture...

“Good grief!” the Spam penguins shouted. “We want to live!” They surged forward, pushing the writer’s chair over the cliff.

He plummeted through the air, his heart racing, pulse pounding, pissing his pants. He screamed in terror as the pit of bubbling lava rushed closer. Images from his life flashed before his eyes – the time he ran away from the dentist’s office, his first date when he came in his pants and had to go home, being a pall bearer at his grandfather’s funeral, going to the doctor’s office with Karen when she got the abortion...

And then he hit the lava, plunging deep into the molten liquid, his skin bubbling, crackling, turning to ash. His hair vaporized, eyeballs exploded. His mind raced, aflame with pain, as his bones blackened. The searing white hot flame of creativity was burned into his soul. Finally, his office chair wheeled into his office, taking its place before his computer. He was a skeleton of his former self.

Back to work. He had to get this story written or he’d be washed up in as a writer forever. Penguins made of Spam. Spam penguins hunting pineapples disguised as Una O’Connor. That was the assignment, but he just couldn’t make it come to life. Why couldn’t he get any good ideas?



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# Lose that Limb!

## Daniel W. Gonzales

"Welcome back to the show," Oliver Dextrose said, hamming it up for the camera. The audience stared back at him hungrily; their faces looked like rows of shark teeth and bulging desperate sneers.

"We want blood!" one six year old girl screamed with a LOSE THAT LIMB! T-shirt on.

The host laughed at that.

"What's your name, little one?"

"Pussy."

"Pussy what?"

"Pussy McGee after my grandma. She was the best pussy in our family."

Out of the mouth of babes, Oliver thought.

"Well, gore fans, are you ready for another episode of LOSE THAT LIMB!"

"FUCK YEAH!" the crowd screamed and someone threw down a goat head on stage. The host accepted it gracefully and stroked it's head.

The host's voice was endearing in much the same way that a dog rubbing it's asshole along the carpet was to scratch that particular itch.

Devon saw the curtain pull back and the stage lifted him and his three peers up.

"Returning after five consecutive wins is our champion Devon Monroe of Babylon, California. He is five eight and 185 with a seven inch dick, ladies. He is single, you might want to hop on that!"

"Next to him is Anna Loman, an organ sorter at the St. Franklin Hospital for the Diseased. She says her pet peeves are getting dead skin cells under her fingernails and necrophiliacs."

The audience cheered.

"Finally there is Roland Montgomery, an accountant

from Lunar Park, Oregon. His favorite films are Blowjob Babes 12 and How to Fuck a Millionaire."

More applause.

"Now Devon," Oliver said, "I understand that you used some of your winnings to buy health insurance for your family. You had a dying uncle or something."

"It was my son," Devon said, coldly, "My son needed a kidney transplant. You made me chop off my ex-wife's arms off to get it for him, remember?"

"Oh yes! That was a great episode!" Oliver said to the crowd. His bright yellow suit screaming with purple polka dots on it. A moment later it changed colors and turned a strange shade of reptilian green and dried blood.

"What about you, Anna? Are you ready to throw down with your competition?"

Anna stood about 5'4 and 110 pounds with a brown bob, "I will eradicate these motherfuckers."

"Oh my, we got a confident one here, folks!"

The sound of canned laughter erupted from the speakers as the audience stared ahead blankly.

"What will you do if you win today, Roland?"

"Well my wife is in prison for giving birth to our second child without a legalized permit so I would like to pay to get her out of jail."

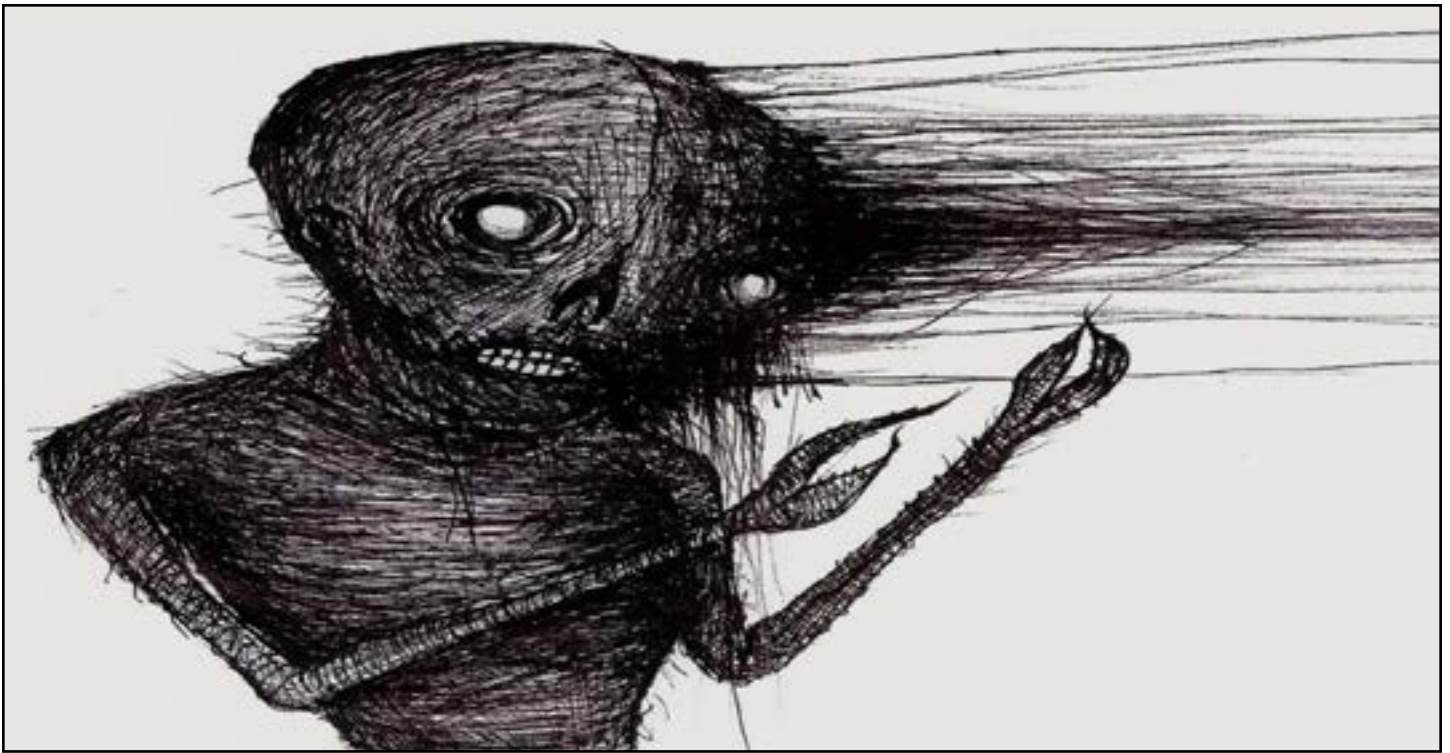
"I think we can do that for you. In fact, let's see who we have behind this door!"

A large metal door swung open behind him.

A sallow looking woman with stringy blonde hair was nailed to a wooden cross.

She was screaming.

"Oh my, that looks painful!" Oliver said and this time the audience did laugh.



“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” Roland screamed.

“We got your wife out of jail and you can stop her pain and take her home with you today if you win this next round. Otherwise....”

The audience finished his sentence, “SHE WILL LOSE THAT LIMB!”

A strange black creature with no shape or form slid onto the stage and moved fluidly in mid-air then was handed a giant bone saw, it morphed into Santana White, the show’s mascot.

She was a three thousand year old polymorphic alien deity with three pussies. Each one had teeth though, still men loved her. There were Santana White posters in every young boy’s bedroom.

“Please don’t do this!” Roland begged. Devon could see the man was older than he looked, he had streaks of grey in his hair and wrinkles around his eyes. He looked as if he had lived a long and terrible life.

“Don’t beg,” Devon whispered to him, “They get off on this shit. You think they care. They came here for blood. We aren’t people to them.”

“No talking among the contestants!” the host said and they were administered electric shocks rectally.

“FIRST ROUND IS TRIVIA!”

A giant holographic head appeared on stage, “Who

starred in the 2067 film epic, Love under a Water Heater?”

A giant holographic cock appeared with a giant hand jerking it off. When it came the round was over.

Anna slammed her hand on the buzzer.

Two needles dug into her palm as she answered, “Katherine Dupree!”

“RIGHT!” the host said and five thousand dollars appeared on her podium screen.

“Next question...”

Roland watched anxiously as his wife mewled painfully in the background.

“...In 2034, who was the Captain of the Usurper army in the Great War of the Androids?”

Roland slammed his hand on the buzzer.

“Colin Maxwell!” he screamed.

“I’m sorry, you are wrong! It was Jonathan Maxwell!”

The audience began chanting then, “LOSE THAT LIMB! LOSE THAT LIMB! LOSE THAT LIMB!”

Santana White smiled and asked for help from an audience member. A young teen wearing a CYBORG RIGHTS t-shirt came on stage. “Hi Santana.”



She purred and licked his face with her elongated forked tongue.

Together they sawed off Roland's wife's arm with the bone saw. Blood squirted everywhere, the woman shrieked, Roland sobbed and tried to run to her. Three men in white suits attacked him and started to beat him.

Once the arm was torn off, they threw it into the studio audience. They were always selling those things on E-bay.

"I'm sorry, Roland but those are the rules but don't worry. We always cauterize the wounds. No bleeding to death on our show, we always say."

The host smiled, "Everyone in our studio audience will get a copy of the home version of LOSE THAT LIMB! Just be careful you don't really lose an arm! And now a word from our sponsors!"

On the TV, a giant iguana complained of having a urinary tract infection.

Roland continued to sob.

Devon shook his head, didn't this asshole know they lived for this. They loved to see people cry. They even had a cry reel set to funny music. He didn't want to come back here but they had come to his home and threatened to cut out his son's kidney. They said he had fans, every time he was on, they got huge ratings. Devon was running out of family members, they were all skipping town, even his co-workers avoided him, afraid that they would kidnap them and take their limbs.

The commercials ended, the host fired out a few more questions and Anna answered them all in rapid fire.

She had earned a cool million. After taxes, she would get to keep 15% of that.

"Please," Roland begged.

"Sorry, buddy," the host laughed, "But we have to send your wife back to prison now. Santana, can you take those nails out of her?"

Round Two began and Devon woke up in a white room.

Blood started to leak from the walls and form hieroglyphic patterns. They almost looked Egyptian. Then he heard the sound of screaming on the other



side of the walls. It was his brother Marcus.

Those motherfuckers took his brother!

"I put my brother into protective custody, you motherfuckers!"

The room started to rotate and then objects began to appear.

A table, a chair, a lamp, a couch.

Devon realized this was some sort of puzzle but he couldn't figure it out.

In another holographic chamber, Roland was swimming in a pool of leeches and had to find a key buried in one out of fifty chests and they were all electrified.

Anna found herself chewing through insects and various small animals. She ripped open a squirrel with her teeth searching for a microchip that would open the door. There were only fifty two more animals to go.

A voice boomed from the walls to Devon.

"One of these objects in this room does not belong, guess which one soon or your brother loses a limb!"



The room filled with objects at a startling rate now. Skis, a flat screen TV from the late twenty first century, an antique copy of People Magazine, a dildo, a mechanical horse, a holo-brain disk, a cybernetic cat, a green pig, a feral monkey doll and a spinning snow globe floating over fire.

The hieroglyphics on the wall were starting to disappear. He scanned over them trying to decipher words.

This wasn't Egyptian. This was Ventaurian. He studied this language in college.

Fuck. What is that letter?

He heard his brother being electrocuted through the wall.

"FUCK!" he shouted.

The audience was mesmerized. At home, millions of viewers were on the edge of their seats. That was when the spikes began to shoot up through the floor.

"Come on! Give me a fucking break!" Devon said.

He focused on the disappearing glyphs.

T-H-E B-I-B-L-E O-F T-H-E O-L-D....O-A-R-S. No, it was O-N-E-S.

A spike shot up through his foot and he screamed, the pain travelled in searing waves.

In the other room, Anna bit through a scorpion's tale and found the microchip.

Roland was choking on water and covered in leeches in his room.

Devon pulled his foot up from the floor and ignored the horrible throbbing pain and limped over to the table where the People magazine was and tore it to pieces.

"DEVON WINS!" the host shouted.

The door opened then and his brother ran to him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just another day in Paradise," Devon said and the medics tended to his foot.

The host smiled at the camera, "Ain't that guy just the luckiest son of a bitch in the world?"

Round Three.

The three of them stood in a parking lot in the back of the studio. The audience was monitoring them from the inside. Santana White greeted them.

"Okay, here is the game. One of these blue magic glowing orb things is in one of those concrete vaults. There are thirty vaults and only one of you can get the orb, that person will win fifty million dollars and free health care for their family regardless of pre-existing conditions. Meaning that the cancer cure will be covered."

Only 10% of the population could afford the cancer cure and about 60% of the populace had some form of cancer now from the food, the air or just by birth.

Devon thought of his father who was slowly dying in his home, he could save his life. His son would get to know his granddad.

Anna had just been diagnosed with breast cancer last week.

The host pulled up her medical records on the screen for everyone to see, "As you can see through x-rays here that Anna's doctor has provided for us, she has a special reason to want this prize. She only has three months to live. While Devon's father is dying of cancer and Roland will most likely develop cancer in the next three years according to his doctor."

"What?" Roland said, "He said that?"

"So as you can see, there are multiple ways to open up these vaults. We have sledgehammers, electric jack hammers, bombs, grenades, cars, a crane, a tractor and even a Siberian psychokinetic helmet to try and burst open one with your mind. Choose carefully your weapons and good luck."

The timer came up on the screen.

They all ran into the field.

Anna grabbed a jackhammer and went at a safe, she lost control of it and it knocked her on her back.

Devon hopped in a car and rammed it into the nearest vault, it cracked open but it was empty.

Roland got in the crane and swung the wrecking ball, smashing through three safes but they were all empty.

Devon ran over to the box of grenades and Anna stopped him. She clawed at his face and they rolled on the ground, he punched her in the jaw and then

grabbed three grenades, started pulling out the pins with his teeth and throwing them. There was a giant explosion and Anna was thrown back into the car windshield.

These vaults weren't empty but filled with poisonous rats and snakes.

The rats oozed venom from their lips. Devon grabbed a sledgehammer and started swinging at them wildly.

Anna took advantage of his distraction and hopped into the tractor.

She picked up a safe and threw it.

It cracked and the blue orb emerged, it rolled across the lot.

Anna ran from the trailer while Devon grabbed the sledgehammer and swung it, hitting her in the side of the head and her skull shattered.

He had played dirty before and that was how you won these things.

Roland had the psychokinetic helmet on and threw Devon across the lot and into the box of grenades. Devon quickly kicked them away before they exploded.

No! he shouted but he was too late.

Roland had the blue orb in his hand and it burst in a ball of light and enveloped his entire body.

"We have a winner!" the host shouted. The audience burst into applause.

The ratings were through the roof.

"You won the fifteen million and free health insurance!"

Roland sobbed joyously.

A group of medics went over to Anna and pronounced her dead.

"Now it's that time again, folks," Oliver the host said and grinned.

"No, fuck you!" Devon screamed, "I didn't want to be here, you forced me to! This isn't fair."

The men in white coats injected him with a paralyzing agent and brought him back into the studio.

"It's okay," the host said and the lights on the stage

dimmed and a spotlight came on.

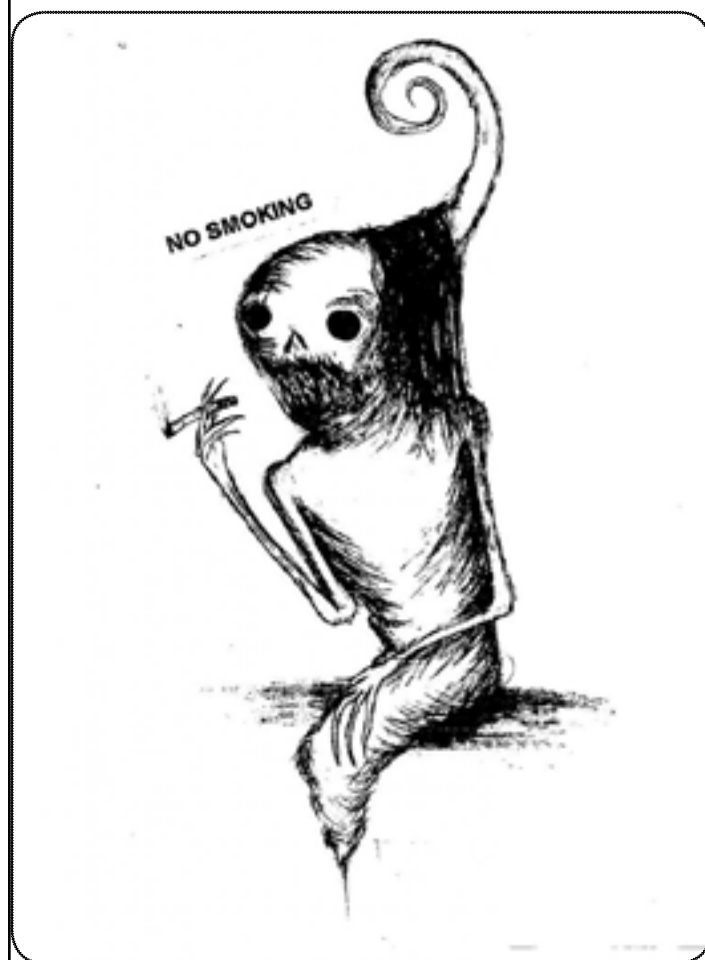
"This is the name of the game, after all," the host said. We have to give the folks what they want."

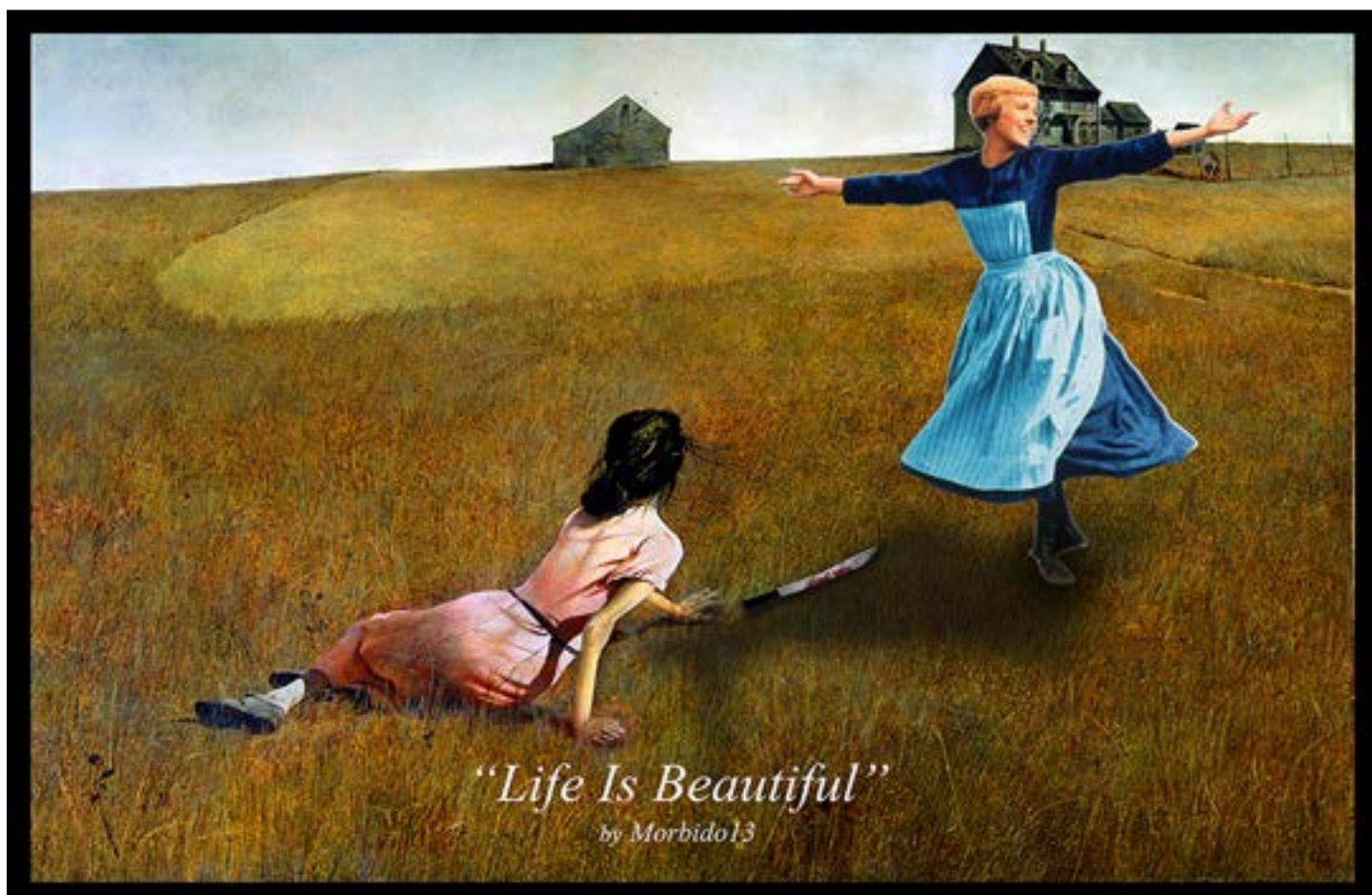
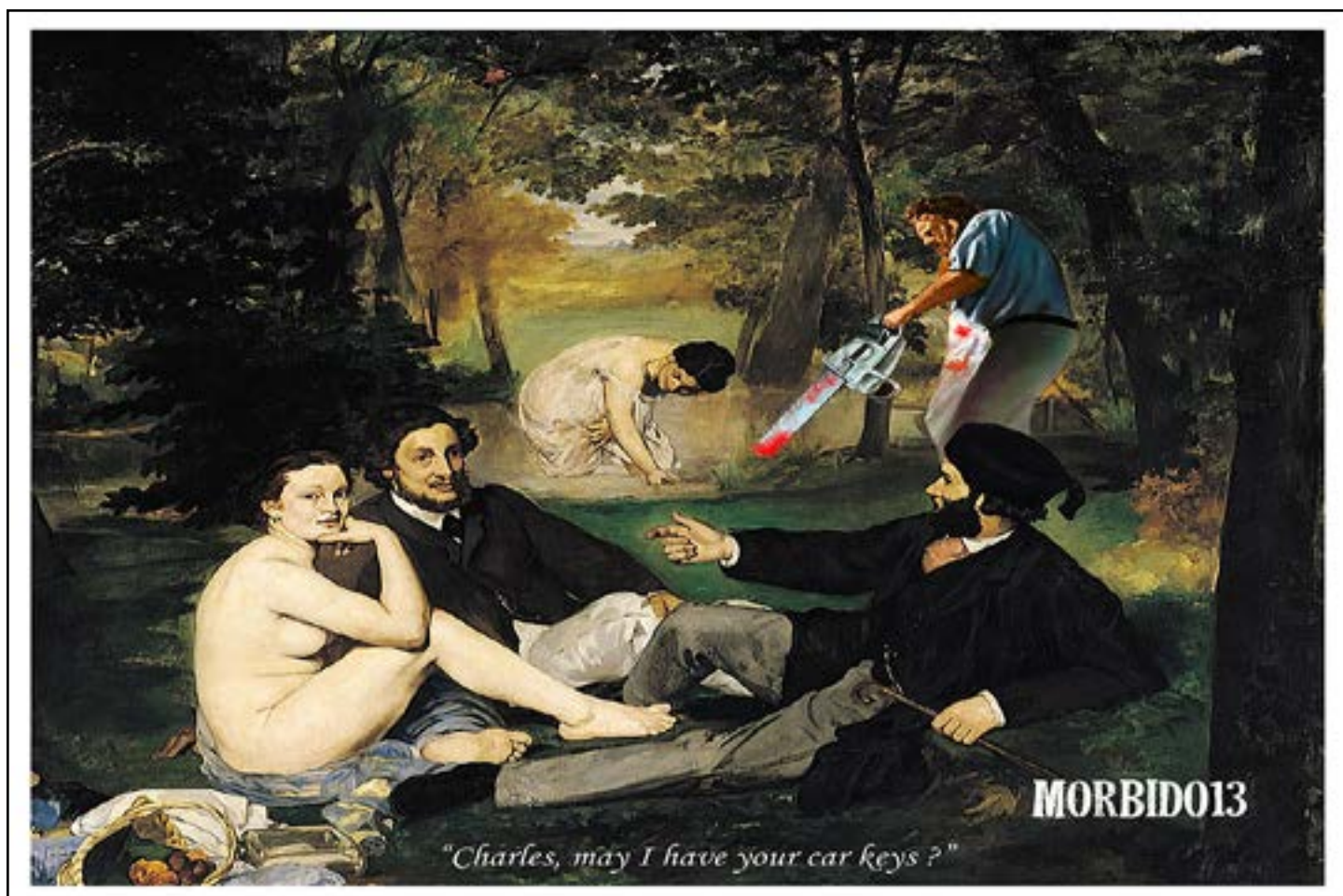
Devon was strapped to a chair as his left arm was pulled out to the side of him and locked in a vice. He saw the glittering blade of the guillotine above him.

The audience began to chant then like they always did.

"LOSE THAT LIMB! LOSE THAT LIMB! LOSE THAT LIMB!"

Then the blade came down.









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# STEVE IN THE THANOVERSE

## David W. Barbee

Steve was a good name for an astronaut.

He'd wanted to be one since he was a boy. He studied, trained, wore a permanent buzzcut, honed himself into a physical specimen, was devastated when NASA rejected his application.

He was very depressed. For a very long time.

Until one day someone called him. Steve answered a few questions, met with a woman in smart glasses who came out to his home. They talked about his NASA application, his feelings about his failure, and his thoughts on other opportunities for extraterrestrial travel.

He couldn't say yes fast enough.

There weren't any new tests to take. They sat him down in a comfortable room and the woman in smart glasses explained the experiment to him. She was honest about the first hundred test subjects, each turned into bloody slush when they walked through the doorway.

They wanted Steve to walk through next.

The woman in smart glasses explained.

The doorway didn't lead through normal space, but onto a different plane of reality. Steve watched her ramble on about quantum particles and dimensional transference, her lips forming each word with perfect grace. She talked about an energy loop connecting all animated beings, a vast ring flowing across two interdimensional planes. The doorway allowed them to step outside the ring's natural flow and travel from one side to the other.

This side was the land of the living. The other side was what they called the Thanoverse.

"All the necessary adjustments have been made," she said, "and you're the most qualified test subject we've ever had, Steve."

This time he blinked before saying yes.

First they mummified him, wrapping his body in strips of soft white linen that were damp and acrid. He stepped into the heavy boots of the jumpsuit, baggy and made

of rubbery gray material. The technicians carefully maneuvered the suit up his legs. They guided the sleeves over his arms so that his hands rested in loose-fitting gloves. Steve had to smile as they zipped him up.

When the suit was closed tight, the technicians clipped a metal ring around Steve's neck, the collar for his helmet. Then came the harness, a steel vest covered in blinking sensors and devices. It was heavy, but Steve had no trouble with it. His shoulders were wide and strong. He smiled some more.

The technicians wrapped a big tool belt around his waist, clipping it to the suit so it didn't fall off. The belt's many pouches were filled with heavy instruments and utensils, mostly pliers and tweezers and tongs to collect samples, and little glass jars to put them in. He smiled wider, feeling like a real astronaut.

The technicians finished suiting him up and Steve took his first steps. He carried all the extra weight with ease. The woman in smart glasses walked with him to the launching bay. "Remember the four things, Steve," she said.

"What will I see on the other side?"

"We don't know," she said. "Just look around, walk around, take something, come back. Do those four things and absolutely nothing else."

The technicians escorted Steve away from her, down a sterile hall and into a gigantic room. A yellow stripe ran across the floor, and at the end of it was the doorway. Steve stared at it as the technicians led him to his mark at the other end of the line. The doorway was an arch of thick steel struts. Between them was a narrow oval opening. It was clamped to the floor, with fuses and sockets dotting the smooth steel, interspersed with curvy runes carefully etched along the inner edges. Light bulbs screwed along the outer sides glowed and flickered with power.

The technicians put Steve on his mark and checked his harness again. One of them lowered a glass bowl over his head. The base of the bowl clamped onto the metal collar around Steve's neck. The technicians then retreated from the enormous room, footsteps echoing. They sealed him inside, alone with the doorway.

Steve heard his breath echo off the walls of the glass bowl. The doorway still gazed at him, the line of tape leading into its opening. He looked behind him. High on the wall was a window, behind which he could see the scientists, watching.

He saw the woman in smart glasses behind the glass. She nodded to Steve and he turned back to face the doorway. Time to get to work.

Steve followed the line of tape on the floor. His feet moved sure and steady, but as he got closer the entire room began to vibrate. The light bulbs on the doorway glowed bright, nearly blinding him. Steve squeezed his eyes shut and kept walking forward.

The devices on his harness beeped and whined, chiming in with the monotonous noise. Steve's fingers felt numb and cold. His teeth rattled. "Is this normal?" he shouted. The speakers said something in response but he couldn't hear it over the colossal hum filling the room. He was inches from the doorway now.

Steve grit his teeth, carefully edging each foot forward, his eyes tightly clenched. He stepped between the curving steel struts and disappeared into the light.

Silence hit him like a car crash.

He saw redness right outside the glass bowl covering his head. Steve assessed his surroundings. He stood in front of a wall covered in creeping red vines. But they looked nothing like plants. They were made of sort of thick pulsating gunk, squirming and twisting along the wall like veins full of blood.

Steve drew in a deep breath, noted that he felt calm and refreshed. He remembered his orders. The four things. First, look around.

Steve turned his head within the fishbowl to look down the length of the wall. He stepped back and looked around, taking it all in. The hallway was about ten feet wide. The walls and floor were smooth shiny black marble, with glittering divots and white streaks. Growing all along the marble were patches of the pulsating red vine. Clouds infested with lightning bolts blanketed the sky. On either side of Steve were more corridors splitting off from where he stood. It was a maze.

Steve realized that he always thought the afterlife would be a serene wonderland, the sort of thing religious people talk about. But the Thanoverse was like nothing any of them could have imagined.

The spirit world was eerily quiet. Neither the lightning in the sky nor the quivering vines hugging the walls made any sound. The lights on Steve's harness blinked aggressively. He took measured breaths inside his glass bowl, conserving his oxygen.

He remembered the next thing. Walk around.

Steve carefully stepped back to the place where he'd started. He decided not to stray from that spot. Instead of walking around and getting lost he would climb the marble wall to get a lay of the land.

He grabbed onto the thick vines layering the wall, and red goop squeezed out from between his gloved hands. Steve pulled himself up, pulling and stepping, the vines bleeding thick ooze wherever he touched. He straddled the top of the wall and surveyed the Thanoverse.

The maze of black marble stretched out in every direction, disappearing into a fuzzy horizon. Steve wondered if this place was round like the earth, or just infinite flatness. He guessed that an alternate dimension could be either one. He stared out across the horizon, where the maze melded into the lightning-strewn sky.

He saw movement.

It flitted across his vision, traveling down a far-off corridor. It whipped back and forth and a fan of feathers adorned the tip. The feathers were lush and colorful, black and green and blue with bright golden spots. They reminded Steve of peacock feathers, but the pole they were attached to swished and swayed like a tail, as if it belonged to a gigantic animal stalking the maze.

A great roar sounded, blasting the silence of the Thanoverse.

Steve wasn't alone.

The third thing. Take something.

Steve threw his leg back over the wall and hopped down. His boots hit the ground hard, splattering red gunk. He brushed the stuff away from his suit, picked globs of it from the nooks and crannies of his harness. The soggy red mess flicked away, easily unsticking itself from him.

Another loud roar echoed off the maze walls. Steve felt a great tidal wave of fear crash over him, soaking him in a deep terror. He was alone, a mind-blowing distance from home, about to die.

Take something.

Steve bent down and fished out a glass jar from his tool belt. He opened the jar and then took out a pair of pliers. With the pliers he reached down to the tangled carpet of red vines and yanked out a piece. He dropped the gooey specimen into the jar and sealed the lid. It squirmed against the glass.

Steve tucked the jar back in his tool belt as he stood up. Looking at the walls again, he saw that they were different than when he'd first arrived. The corridor he stood in was shorter. The offshooting corridors were arranged

differently. The patches of red vine grew in different shapes. Steve looked down, past the blinking buzzing harness strapped to his chest, and saw fresh vines with no footprints.

He was lost now.

Steve looked up in time to see the peacock-feathered tail fly along the wall in front of him. Another echoing roar, closer now.

The tail had been going left, so Steve ran right. He moved well despite the bulky equipment and the puffy jumpsuit. He ran around corners and splashed through patches of red vine, his tool belt bouncing around his waist. His breath fogged in front of his face. The smelly linen rags began to twist and bunch around his armpits and crotch. Steve stopped at an intersection in the maze, huffing and puffing in his glass bowl.

Maybe the scientists could bring him back even if he got lost. They probably had that technology. They wouldn't send him to another dimension if they weren't sure they could bring him back. Surely they wouldn't.

He heard the roar again, but mixed with it was a chirp. The chirp kept sounding even as the roar died down. Instead of running, Steve looked down at his harness. Maybe there was a tracking beacon that the scientists were using to transport him back.

Only the chirps weren't coming from the harness.

They came from his tool belt.

It had to be the sample jar. Steve reached in with a gloved hand and pulled it out, the piece of red vine still captured inside. The little piece had grown to fill half of the jar now, curled along the wall like a misshapen noodle. It drew air into one side of itself, inflating its gooey flesh, then quickly expelled it, releasing the chirp sound.

Another roar. Lightning streaked the sky and the red vines quivered against the marble walls all around him.

Steve put the jar back into his tool belt and started running again. The roars came faster. He saw more of the peacock-feathered tails, always swishing over the next wall, following but never quite colliding. The more Steve saw the harder he ran. Until finally his feet got twisted in their baggy boots.

Steve tumbled to the ground and splashed into a large patch of red vine. His arms and legs flew as he tumbled down. The harness bit into his shoulders and ribs. His tool belt flapped upside down and all of his instruments rained out onto the red patch. As he fell, the glass bowl pressed through the sludgy vines and shattered against the marble floor. Little shards twinkled all around his head. Steve shut his eyes and held his breath until his lungs forced him to take a gulp of air.

He breathed normally. He opened his eyes.

Steve saw the sample jar lying in the gooey vines. He gasped as he stared at the jar, and on the other side of the glass they stared back.

The sample now filled the jar completely. And it was no longer a single mass. The red slime had split into hundreds—if not thousands—of tiny little people. Their little red bodies were soft and pliant, pressed flat against the glass by their sheer multitudes. Many of them were dead, squeezed or asphyxiated to death. The ones that were alive stared through the glass with big round eyes and screamed in tiny terrified voices.

Some of them were looking at Steve. Most looked at the thing standing behind him.

Steve felt its presence. Lightning flashed and threw a shadow against the floor, the shadow of a flitting feathery tail. Steve palmed the jar full of tiny red people. Very slowly, he got to his feet. Very carefully, he turned around to see it.

The beast filled the corridor with its massive body. It was coated in blue fur, bright and velvet smooth. It had the face of a lion, and its long body flowed like a snake's, crouching on twelve powerful legs. Its giant blue paws silently padded the marble floor with predatory grace. At the end of its body was the tail, pointing skyward and twitching to and fro.

Steve backed away. The great lion crept forward, keeping the same distance. It pushed its face toward Steve, a bright colorful death mask. The mane circling its face was made of the same peacock feathers as its tail, a collar of hypnotic spots and streaks. Three golden eyes stared, unblinking. Its massive jaw hung open, and behind rows of glittering black teeth there sat a burning fireball in the back of the creature's throat. It radiated heat out at Steve.

Steve wanted to turn and run but knew he'd never make it. There was nowhere to hide in this maze, and the gigantic death lion would eat him before he could ever get that far. He was about to die in the land of the dead.

"I'm just visiting," Steve said.

The giant blue lion cocked its head. Its tail stopped its swaying and adopted a new curious gyration. "Why?" it said in a whispery voice that came from the fireball in the back of its throat.

"I don't know," Steve answered.

"Are you going back?" asked the lion.

"I don't know that either," said Steve.

"But it's too late to go back," said the lion. "Hundreds of years have passed in the living world since you left it."



Steve looked down at the glass jar still in his hand. “How could that be?” he said, staring through the glass. The jar was now filled with ancient dust. The red people were all dead.

“Time is different in the Thanoverse. That’s what you call it, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, looking up at the lion.

What he saw was himself, a mirror image standing in the corridor with him, smiling gently. The lion looked exactly like Steve now, but he didn’t wear the special jumpsuit. He wore a smart pair of glasses. Steve looked at his clone and thought of how small he looked.

Steve looked at himself and realized that he was the great blue lion now.

“Let me climb inside of you,” said the one that was Steve now. The little human stepped forward and climbed up into the blue lion’s mouth, pulling himself over the sharp black fangs. He crawled face first into the burning sun at the back of the throat. Steve tasted the smoke as he incinerated himself in his own mouth.

The great blue lion went back to stalking through the corridors, its feathered tail swishing above the walls. Soon it found the center of the maze, a great pit of blistering white sand. The lion padded across the sand on its twelve paws and circled a spot. Carefully crouching, the lion grunted and expelled a twisted metal harness. Its devices blinked and buzzed, flickered and flashed, as the whole thing sank down into the sand.

BIO: David W. Barbee writes weird fiction. His work has appeared in Full Metal Orgasm, Amazing Stories of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction, and The Best Bizarro Fiction of the Decade.



C·Bird



# [THE JELLY PUMPS]

WILLIAM PAULEY III

She said, "Let's go to the ocean," and twenty minutes later we were headed east. We were driving so fast, the stars flew by our ears, looking more like lines on the road than heavens for men. The wind blew through our hair and we waved our arms outside the windows, pretending we were eagles. We didn't fly, but I feel we came close. A song played on the radio called "Your Funeral, My Trial." I stared at the sky, my face basking in the pale moonlight, as the man on the radio sang about his worry, his shame, his long forgotten love. We listened to the song on repeat until we met up with the end of the world. The ocean, the salty sea. I hadn't seen it in so long. So many years wasted on other things – other loves, other feelings, other beauties – but nothing compares, nothing even comes close.

Haley wrecked her car as we pulled in to park. She failed to brake as she turned into the lot, crushing the front end into the only streetlamp in sight for miles, which now pointed outward at a forty-five degree angle. The light from above fluttered and strobed in anger at us before finally burning out completely. Our only light now came from the full moon above. We opened our doors and stepped out onto the pavement. Smoke rolled out from under the hood and the engine popped and cracked like rocks in a campfire.

It felt great to be so far away from home. I grabbed Haley's hand and we climbed the small hill that led to the shore. The hill was thick with grass and soaking up the early morning dew. We took turns picking each other up as we slipped our way to the top, the sounds of the ocean sloshed into my ears, teasing us with its call. The grass was tallest at the top, as if someone out in there in the night was trying to hide the ocean from us.

But we found it.

And it was ours...for an hour.

We took off our shoes and stepped into the sand. I

sunk into the damp earth, the sand oozing between my toes, before burying them completely. Not that I could see them anyway, the entire planet had been dipped in darkness. The moon allowed me to see the outline of Haley's body, but not much else. I remember her appearing more beautiful to me in that moment than she ever had before. This one memory, this single image of her bathing in the moonlight, looking over at me, pulling her hair back behind her ears and smiling, still haunts me to this day. I don't have her anymore, but that part comes later.

The black ocean crashed upon the shore, sounding like a television gone to static. I closed my eyes and became hypnotized by the sound. I lifted my arms to the sky and let the fierce cold wind crack its whips upon me. I was a slave to the elements in that moment. I know there is no such thing as peace, but I was feeling something then that was close to it, as close as anything I'd ever experienced before at least, or ever again for that matter. The night felt electric. My feet felt rooted inside a mechanical earth. I was part of the machine, but also part of nature, a human somehow evolving and de-evolving all at once. I felt closeness, I heard the heartbeat of our god, our mother, in the soil. Haley felt it too, but we said nothing to each other. She grabbed my hand and we walked along the edge of the earth without our eyes to guide us.

Haley was the first to see them. Out about a hundred feet from the shore there were strange yellow lights, hundreds of them. They seemed to be moving closer to us, and growing in number. We sat down on the sand, wrapped our arms around each other, and waited for them to reach the shore.

"I think it's a submarine," she said, breaking a half hour of silence.

"No way. The lights are too sporadic to be any kind of craft," I said, squeezing her sides in my arms.



"Whatever they are, they're alive."

She seemed scared after that. I didn't notice right away, but once the lights finally reached the shore it became obvious. She leapt to her feet and sprinted back for her shoes. I laughed and grabbed her by the ankle and she fell down in the sand.

"Let me go!" she screamed, kicking her feet at my hands. I wrapped my arms around her and told her it was okay.

"They're jellyfish," I said, as the living lights washed up on the shore.

She calmed down and we sat there as the ocean spewed these lovely creatures all around us. Soon we were surrounded by hundreds of them, their little yellow bodies flashing as if the sands were on fire, all of them out of time of one another. It was an incredible sight, almost as beautiful as the image of Haley under the moonlight, but nowhere near as painful.

I looked over at Haley, her face fully visible now from the jellyfish glow of the sands. I loved her. It was in that very moment that I first really knew for sure. I should have told her. I would have, if I knew then that these were going to be my last moments with her. The sun was beginning to rise. I could smell the ocean absorbing the sunlight. We both had a thousand reasons to go back home that very minute, but we didn't leave. We sat there and watched the sun as it came up out of the ocean. As daylight began to crack through the once solid night sky, Haley dug down deep into her purse and pulled out a small wooden box.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Happiness," she replied. It was the last word she ever said, to me, to anyone.

She threw her purse in the direction of our shoes, looked at me and smiled. The pink rays of sunlight slid down over her face as if she were peaking out at me from behind a set of window blinds. She closed her eyes and we kissed. Her taste was salty. I thought then that maybe it was just the ocean that made her this way, but now looking back, I can't help but wonder if I tasted death on her tongue that night.

She opened the box. Five syringes, complete with needles, were inside. I was shocked. I didn't know she was a user. In fact, it was at that moment that I also realized that I didn't really know too much about her at all. I was in love with a complete stranger. I wanted to ask her what the needles were for, hoping for a different reason than what I was assuming, but before

I could, she was up on her feet and running out toward the sea of beached electric jellyfish. All in a single motion, she took one of the syringes and pierced the skin of one of the creatures. She pulled back on the plunger and withdrew as much greenish-yellow glowing jellyfish blood the tube could hold, and then pulled out.

She handed it to me. I took it. I should have done anything else, but I took it. I held it as she filled another for herself. When she was finished, she flicked the syringe, emptying any pockets of oxygen that may have been hidden inside. I did the same. I should have done anything else, but I did the same. We kissed one final time, the heat from the sun warming our necks, before she stepped back, out of our kiss, and dove headfirst into darkness. She took it all. Every bit. Every drop of glowing electric jelly was emptied into her veins. She collapsed and fell to the sand before even having the chance to remove the needle from her arm.

I should have picked her up.

I should have removed the needle.

I should have done anything else, but I did nothing. She went into a coma the moment the jelly got to her heart. She continued to breathe for maybe ten minutes after that, but it was difficult, complicated breathing. Blood leaked from her mouth, her nose, the corners of her eyes. I did nothing but sit there, staring at the needle full of jelly in my hand and contemplating whether or not I should lay there and die with her.

I was a coward.

I am a coward.

I sat next to her until the moment her heart stopped beating. Before leaving, I sent her off into the ocean, a burial at sea.

I went home and haven't stopped thinking of her since. Even now, some forty odd years later, I can still smell her perfume as I stand here on the edge of the land staring off into the sea. The smell of salt reminds me of her kiss, her taste. To taste Haley was to taste death itself.

Somehow I taste her now.

I should walk back to my car and drive home, but I won't. I should drive home to my children, my grandchildren, but I won't. I can't shake her, Haley. I never could. I should do anything else, but I won't. Instead, I take off my clothes and walk into the cold vast deep that becomes my home.



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# IRON FIST IN A VELVET GLOVE

By Lars Kramhoft

## Part 3 of 4

For a while Franz wasn't anywhere. When he came to, he found himself in dark place that smelled of rot and rust and gasoline.

He could tell he wasn't tied up anymore, but he still couldn't move. His right hand felt weird – like when he sometimes found he had fallen asleep on top of it and cut off the circulation.

Something was prodding him in his lower back, but he couldn't adjust his position because there was also something heavy weighing down on him from above, and for a while he was forced to resign himself to his immobile fate.

For all the darkness, the smells and the claustrophobic feeling of being held fast by bulging shapes that surrounded him on all sides, Franz might as well have found himself in the intestines of a great whale. But he didn't.

He was inside a garbage truck.

"Hello," he said and heard his voice bounce back metallically.

With a dull whirring sound the whole world suddenly tilted, and the garbage truck shat out Franz along with all the big black plastic bags that had kept him company.

A choir of seagulls welcomed him back to life as he sailed through the air, hit a pile of something soft and squishy, rolled down, and finally came to a halt with his face in a moldy stack of potatoes.

He rolled around on his back, gasping for air.

All around him a patchwork landscape of crumbled metal, colored plastic and unrecognizable, broken things rose and fell in mountains and valleys of trash. The landfill screamed hysterically at Franz with its gamut of ungraceful colors and smells.

The sky was still pale with the last light of the setting sun.

Below him the ground was made of plastic bags that squeaked and ensconced themselves when he moved. Suddenly afraid of being swallowed up by a mire of trash, Franz staggered to his feet, and that was when he noticed the changes his right hand had undergone. From the elbow and down it seemed to have been coated with a bizarre amalgamation of spongy skin and hard, keratinous plates – like a monstrous glove grafted onto his arm.

The soft parts throbbed vaguely as if the attachment had a life of its own.

Raising his strange new hand to his eyes, Franz realized with the kind of detached amusement that heralds screaming insanity that he could still make out his fingers, sticking out at the end, but elongated and calcified into claws. Close to his wrist a kind of cyst the size of a chicken's egg bulged out, covered by a thin membrane.

Franz tried to tear at the thing, but it was stuck and it only hurt when he dug his nails into the fleshy parts.

"Hey, that one's not dead!"

At the sound of the voice Franz spun around. Behind him, on the top of a steep slope stood two garbage men in gray uniforms. Beside them the garbage truck was still running, its hindquarters still mooning him obscenely.

"Oy, why aren't you dead? You supposed to be dead," the garbage man yelled at Franz.

"Well, I'm not," Franz answered sullenly.

"Maybe it's a ghost?" the first garbage man said to the second in a lowered voice.

Franz started walking towards the slope and the garbage men, but his feet kept sinking down between all the junk and refuse everywhere. This was all together the most awkward and embarrassing thing he had ever experienced.

"Look I'm not dead!" Franz cried out and almost tripped over a broken latrine.



"But you must be!" the second garbage man shouted to him. "The clinic only disposes of dead subjects!" "I'm not a subject, my name is Franz Dreyer!" Franz Dreyer said.

"I'm telling you, it's a bloody ghost!" the first garbage man insisted.

The other one nodded thoughtfully as if he was getting more used to the idea.

"Well, there is one way to find out," he said and drew out a small pistol which he aimed at Franz.

"The system never makes mistake after all."

"But this time it did! It really did!" Franz yelled.

"This whole blasted affair has been a mistake from the beginning!"

He was feeling some unusual emotions coursing through his veins. A burning hot and bitter sensation, like bile rising from his stomach. And his hands had started shaking.

The shot made all the seagulls take to the air in one grimy sweep.

Franz closed his eyes.

Then he opened them again. Then he opened them even wider.

He had caught the bullet in his hand. Not in his normal, left hand, but in his new hand. His right hand. He hadn't even willed it to do it, and it didn't even hurt, just tickled a bit.

Now he told himself to open the clawed hand, and the bullet fell out and made a small clinking sound as it bounced off a broken alarm clock at his feet.

The garbage men stared at him. High above, the seagulls cackled and complained.

Then Franz felt a sickening sense of an opening in the palm of his right hand. His first thought was that the bullet had wounded him after all, but then, over the edges of his outstretched claws he saw a meaty tentacle shoot forth towards the garbage men.

It looked vaguely articulated, like a spine, and at its far end a strange prehensile organ opened hungrily towards the garbage men. They screamed and disappeared beyond the ledge, abandoning their third man, the truck.

The tentacle withdrew back into Franz's new hand like a tape measure snapping back on its own.

It sent a pleasant tingling sensation through his body.

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It took Franz several hours to get back to the shoebox,

and by the time he could close the door behind him and breathe a sigh of relief that came all the way from the bottom of his feet, Kievorad was shrouded in darkness. Franz had stolen his way back home through mews and back alleys, hiding in the shadows from passing gendarmes, shrouded in a moldy old blanket he had found in the landfill. All the time, the only thing he could think of was Marlene. He missed her, he needed her, and if she would just hold him in his arms for a moment everything would be all right.

Even stray cats and dogs had walked in huge circles around him, as if they smelled the strange growth he cradled under the blanket, like some disfigured, newborn monstrosity. It had become clear to Franz that the thing wasn't going to come off. No matter how vigorously he scratched or tore at it, it seemed to have merged with his body completely, and had become as much a part of him as his feet or his head. He had thought about getting an axe and simply chopping the thing off, but found that he had grown strangely attached to it, and winced at the thought of hurting it. Maybe it was those low babbling sounds it made, or the slow pulsation that made it feel as if it was breathing.

Franz dropped the blanket to the floor. He needed a bath.

It was well over dinner time, but Marlene wasn't home. The shoebox was empty, and silent as the grave.

Then Franz noticed that there were vegetables and utensils lying on the kitchen table. They had an oddly bewildered look to them, like onlookers at an accident.

The relief that had washed over Franz when he entered the shoebox was chased away by a migraine of churning storm clouds when he noticed the letter on the table where they had eaten the night before. He had some trouble opening the letter with his new hand. The delicate movements of his fingers that he'd always taken for granted proved difficult to him now, with his fingers turned into claws. Eventually he manage to shed the envelope and unveil the bad news inside.

The letter read:

*Dear Franz Dreyer*

*It has come to our attention that an experiment which you participated in at the clinic has met with some unexpected development. You were indeed not*

*supposed to have been transported to the Groposte landfill in a live state.*

*Notice that the clinic and the department of warfare & public health disclaims any and all responsibility for this unfortunate situation, and that the fault, as should be obvious to anyone, lies solely with yourself.*

*Report back to the clinic tomorrow at ten that we might set things in order.*

*PS: Since it is our impression, judging from your behavior recounted to us by two servants of the public, that you might need further motivation to cooperate, we have taken your fiancée into our custody and will kill her should you fail to show up at the designated time.*

*Sincerely,*

*The department of warfare & public health*

Franz crumbled up the paper and took a few staggering steps towards the front door. The floor creaked below him, and he felt seasick. He had to steady himself against the door for a moment.

Tears filled his eyes, and a strained, guttural sound forced its way out through his gritted teeth. It was not a sound anyone had ever heard Franz utter before in his life.

It wasn't fair. None of this was fair. He had just been trying to do his job and mind his own business and set aside a little money and be happy with Marlene and then all this had happened. They didn't have the right to do this to him. To Marlene.

The bulging shape on the side of his wrist suddenly opened and revealed a glistening red eye.

Franz clenched his new hand. His new weapon. Then he took a deep breath. His mind was a trashed china store of panicked, frantic thoughts, but he forced them back into a shape he could use.

He made up his mind. There was really only one thing for him to do.

So he went to bed.

TO BE CONTINUED

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# Bugeye

## by Murray Tick

He sniffed. Slender strands of nose hair twitched like tiny whiskers. It was the scent—the intoxicating scent—of a bicycle seat.

“Get out of here!” Becky Marshall said.

Melvin clutched her black leather bicycle seat tighter, wrapping his body around its rough form.

“The seat...so soft...so smooth,” Melvin said caressing the bicycle seat.

He rubbed his cheek against its smooth surface.

“Yuck!”

Melvin reached into his old tweed jacket, a hand-me-down from his grandfather, and removed a set of wrenches. He took a small wrench and unbolted Becky’s bicycle seat.

“No!” she said. “It’s my seat Melvin! Not yours, mine!”

Becky pushed Melvin away.

“The seat...I need the seat...”

“It’s my seat!” Becky yelled.

“It’s a lovely seat,” his grating voice a staggered staccato rhythm of belches and squeals.

“Give it back!”

Mrs. Marshall barged through the front door. “Becky, please stop yelling, you’re giving me a headache.”

“He’s doing it again, Mom!” Becky said pointing to Melvin.

“Melvin Bugster!” Mrs. Marshall said. “Do I need to call your parents again?”

He looked up at her, hunched over Becky’s bicycle, his crooked, black speckled, gangrene tooth smile hid a sandpaper tongue.

“Melvin, you’re going to leave now, right?” Mrs. Marshall said.

“The seat...the smell...so young...the scent...”

“Right, that’s it! Becky, don’t move, and don’t encourage him.”

Mrs. Marshall retreated back into her home.

“She’s gonna get it now, Melvin. You should’ve left,” Becky warned.

Mrs. Marshall returned with a very bristly broomstick.

“Get out of here,” she said prodding Melvin off Becky’s bike with the tangled twiggy end. “Go on, get out, and leave my daughter’s bicycle seat alone. Find another.”

Melvin released his grip.

“Yeah, get out of here, Bugeye, you stubby hunchback!” Becky said.

“That was uncalled for, Becky. Go to your room,” Mrs. Marshall said. “And you, Melvin Bugster,” she said pointing a menacing finger at him, “don’t try to steal my daughter’s bicycle seat or come near her, because next time I won’t call your parents, I’ll call the cops.”

Mrs. Marshall slammed the door hard, rattling its hinges.

Becky Marshall opened her second floor bedroom window. “Don’t come back, Bugeye!”

She threw a crumpled piece of paper at Melvin that hit him between his eyes. He unfurled it. A wanted picture, scrawled by the neighborhood watch, showed a crude police sketch of Melvin Bugster. It



had every feature detailing the rather unfortunate origin of his nickname, Bugeye, on account of his rather unfortunate agglomeration of birth defects: a stocky, stubby, hunchback body, with crooked teeth, a lame leg, halitosis every dog shied from, and his most noticeable feature, from which the first person to coin Bugeye had the brilliant idea, one permanently dilated pupil. Beneath the picture was written:

Beware! Seen in the company of farm animals—usually a goat.

Protect your young children from his advances.

Melvin slouched away to the next house over in search of another bicycle seat. Its pristine verdant lawn, encircled by thick hedges, hid two bicycles: a mud-stained, rusted mountain bike and a small pink tricycle with pink tassels on its handlebars. He sniffed the muddy seat. He coughed and spat. He sniffed the pink tricycle's red seat.

"A good seat...a good seat..." he mumbled, his voice as jagged as shattered glass.

Melvin licked it, marking his territory with his offensive saliva.

The front door opened. Little Cindy Stop exited the house with her father. Melvin quickly lumbered off the lawn and hid behind the hedges, peeking through with his permanently dilated pupil.

"I don't want to go for a bike ride."

"You need some exercise. It's healthy for you."

He heaved his daughter onto the tricycle.

"Daddy, the seat's sticky."

"You need to be careful about how you eat, sweetie. Remember: in your mouth, not on you. I know you like ice cream and it's great in the spring, but Mom and I are always telling you to chew your food or else it gets on your clothes and makes them sticky."

"Okay... But what about Cecilia? I can't go anywhere without her."

"Where is she?"

"In my room I think."

"Alright, let's go find Cecilia," Mr. Stop sighed.

They went back inside.

Melvin broke through the bushes. He knelt down next to the bicycle and hugged it.

"Must work quickly,"

He fiddled with his wrenches. The bolt came off easily. He slid the red bicycle seat off its post and clutched his prize. Melvin walked, in the curious way a hunchback sometimes walks, away from the house. Despite his physical failings, he was gifted with excellent hearing; a necessary evil from a cruel creator determined to impose a twisted sense of fairness and justice. I'll damn him in everyway but his ears. He'll be able to hear a bird fart in a windstorm. And it was with these perfect ears that he heard the shriek and sob from Cindy when he reached the end of the street.

"BUGEYE!" Mr. Stop yelled.

But Melvin was home.

It was white, with trimmed hedges. There was a large tree on the curb, and it had a very clean, very well cut, very well kempt lawn—the same design as every house in the neighborhood. Melvin opened the door and went inside. It was a tinhorn museum to the socially inept. Velvet damask couches, whose intricate patterns against Tyrian purple backgrounds, were coupled with avant-garde red striped paper-mache end tables. The Bugsters had purchased no less than three of these monstrosities. But, there was more. A shifty overstocked rug warehouse salesman had sold them the deal of a lifetime—a Persian rug from Darius I bedchamber. It was actually woven from flea ridden calico cat hair. There was a bust of Buddy Jesus that Mrs. Bugster had bought at a movie auction for Dogma for one million dollars, a cast of Van Gogh's ear, and a framed autographed poster of Tim Curry from their favorite movie, Congo, with a gold engraved plaque that read: Winner of the Bugster Academy Award. Every purchase was to accommodate Mrs. Bugster's growing fame and societal status (due to a lucky lottery ticket), which she flaunted with frequent opulent, obnoxious parties.

Melvin delved into the basement, a catacomb of dolls with ripped heads, half-finished inventions, like the automatic reciprocating hand, and soiled magazines of Bike Rider's Monthly. At the other end, behind an old stucco board, was Melvin's private room.

He slid the board aside and went in. He pulled a dangling chain from a dangling ceiling light. It flickered on.

"More seats for you," Bugeye said.

He added the seat to his collection. They were brown, gray, and red; plastic and leather; cushioned and stiff. He shambled to a cardboard box. Resting on top was a bright blue seat, dimpled by perfect ass cheek imprints. It was his first bicycle seat—Becky, he named it. It was stolen too. He licked it.

“One more seat,” he giggled.

Taped to the back wall was his crayon drawing of the neighborhood. Penciled in each irregular box and oblong circle was a date, a time, and a season. Melvin scanned his map.

“The park,” Bugeye said splattering the map with foul smelling sewage from between his teeth.

At this time of year, midday on a Saturday, amid the sweet spring air and warm golden sun, children would be playing on the jungle gym, running around or riding their bicycles, in the neighborhood park, adjacent to the school.

“Melvin?” Mrs. Bugster said from the kitchen. “Mrs. Marshall just called.”

Melvin winced and gripped his ears. To anyone else it would have sounded like a murmur.

“Sweetie, come have some food and tell me what happened. They’re your favorite chocolate chip cookies.”

“Cookies later,” he mumbled, “One more seat...”

He scrambled, oddly silent for a hunchback, to the back of his private room. There was another stucco door and a secret exit. Melvin slid out, taking his favorite bicycle seat with him. He crawled out from behind the hedges at the front of his house.

He sniffed Becky. For a moment, a brief moment, his hump almost straightened, and his pupil almost shrank. The park was a few blocks away, but Melvin’s perfect ears were able to hear the laughter and shrill voices of happy children. He dragged his lame stubby leg. Dogs howled. Pigeons flew. Rats squeaked and scurried away. The park was near; the school was closer.

He stopped at its gate, closed for the summer, and squeezed his head halfway through the bars, stretching it to new disfigured proportions. Drawn, in chalk, on the playground floor, was a sketch of Melvin. His crooked teeth were colored brown. His scraggly hair was colored green. Oblique nostrils had

small red protrusions, his nose hair. His bad leg was colored yellow. And his hump was orange. Worst, was the black “X” crisscrossing the sketch.

Pasted on the windows were self-portraits of every student, from the primitive cave-like sketches of the kindergartners, to the finely crafted curves of teenagers. Melvin Bugster was not among them. He reached through the fence. Though with one permanently dilated pupil, poor depth perception, and a lame leg, Bugeye could not hope to touch the school nor its children.

His tongue sagged. He salivated. His permanently dilated eye dripped a solitary salty drop.

“Becky,” he whispered hoarsely.

Groundskeeper Bishop burst forth from a side door with a broom.

“Shoo! Get out of here!” groundskeeper Bishop said prying Melvin off with the broom. “Get out of here, Bugeye!”

Melvin smiled. He made a guttural grunting laugh.

“You really do smell as bad as the posters say.”

“So many seats...so many bicycles...”

“Go on! Get out of here! I’ll call the cops, yes I will. I may be a janitor but I know my civic duty.”

He swept Melvin away like he was sidewalk trash.

“Don’t come sniffing around here again, or... or it’s the farm for you!”

Becky’s voice, several hundred feet away, reached Melvin like a foghorn next to his ears. He cupped them. He collapsed, writhing.

“Grovel and kneel. Go back to the filth from where you came.”

Melvin limped to the park. Its large green field was dotted with trees. There was a colossal jungle gym situated on a sandpit. Toddlers and school kids dirtied themselves in the hot sand or burned their hands on monkey bars. Tall trees embowered a riding path.

Becky Marshall stood with her bike on the

path talking to her friends. Melvin hurried and hid in the shade of a nearby tree.

“And then he suddenly started chasing me around the house,” Becky Marshall said. “Oh, my Mom was angry. Here we are, new to the neighborhood, invited to a party by one of our new neighbors, and what does her son do? He chases me around the house, sniffing my butt!”

“The cookie...the chocolate chip cookie was in your pocket,” Melvin whispered.

“Then, the seat on my favorite bicycle goes missing. I swear Bugeye stole it.”

“It smelled like the chocolate chip cookie,” he said.

“And guess what? He tried to take my bicycle seat again today,” she said. “He smelled horrible. You know how mildewed clothes reek?”

“Yeah,” her friends replied.

“Well it’s worse than that. I bet that nasty tweed jacket of his hasn’t been washed for years. Or, maybe it has—in the rain!” She laughed. “At least he didn’t get my seat.”

“Well yesterday mine went missing,” said one of her friends.” My Mom had just bought me another one. It was so comfortable. It was a black leather seat with some kind of soft stuffing.”

Melvin licked his lips.

“I’m just glad I don’t look like him,” Becky said. “My mom told me that some people are meant to bear the world’s woes. God Bless the Lord it’s not me.”

“Yeah, but he sure made you smell bad. Didn’t you change your clothes?”

“Of course.”

“Then he must’ve evolved a skunk’s gland, because I can smell something terrible on you.”

“Yuck! At least I got him today. I pegged him right between the eyes with one of the crumpled neighborhood watch posters. It was so funny.”

“I bet.”

“Do you think the breeze will take his stench away?”

“A bike ride is always good.”

Melvin fumbled in his tweed jacket for his tool set. He took two wrenches. He ran after them.

“Becky...” Melvin grunted.

“He’s coming!” She screamed.

The girls jumped on their bikes. Melvin dashed to Becky Marshall, his permanently dilated pupil fixed on her.

“Leave me alone, Bugeye!”

Melvin pushed her off her bicycle.

“That’s my old bicycle seat! I knew you took it!”

He worked like a furious mechanic unbolting her bicycle seat. It came loose. He grabbed it.

“Give them back Bugeye!”

Melvin ran like a hunchback should—awkwardly crooked. He ran passed the school with Becky Marshall close behind.

“I told you not to come back here!” groundskeeper Bishop said.

He joined Becky in the chase, brandishing his broom like a pitchfork.

Cindy Stop was walking with her father to the park.

“I’ll get you a new bicycle seat,” Mr. Stop said. “I’m glad we still have the park. It’s a nice park, right?”

Melvin tripped over little Cindy Stop, crushing her. He wriggled his crooked hunchbacked body, flailing his arms and legs.

“Get off my daughter!” Mr. Stop yelled.

He threw Melvin off Cindy, like a fisherman tosses the offal off his boat. Melvin Bugster sighed. A foul lump of spit and snot launched from his cavernous throat onto Cindy’s face. She cried.

“Don’t let him get away!” groundskeeper Bishop and Becky Marshall said.

“Don’t move, sweetie. I’ll be right back,” Mr. Stop said.

He joined the pursuit.

Melvin reached his house. He crossed the lawn, dove into the hedges, and went to his secret room, wheezing.

“Open up!” Mr. Stop said pounding on the front door.

Mrs. Bugster opened the door. “Oh, wonderful! Guests! Would any of you be interested in a chocolate chip cookie?”

She was a meretricious former model with radiant skin, long hair, and perfect voluptuous breasts. Her lips were always the same red color, and she always wore a red dress.

“My sweet little Melvin doesn’t seem to want any of his favorite cookies.”

“It’s your sweet little Melvin that we’re interested in,” groundskeeper Bishop said staring at Mrs. Bugster’s cleavage.

“You’re his friends?”

“We’re not his friends. We’re taking him to the police. He just...” Mr. Stop paused, eyeing her supple breasts. “He just...he just violated my daughter!” Mr. Stop said.

“My little Melvin?”

“He’s not little. He’s twenty years-old,” Becky said.

“He’s my little boy.”

“He’s a foul creature.”

“Where is he?” groundskeeper Bishop said, the end of his broomstick nearly ablaze.

“He went downstairs to the basement not long ago. He hasn’t come up since.”

“Well he did. He was just in the park. It appears as though your sweet little Melvin escaped,” Becky said.

“Please come inside. I’m sure my sweet little Melvin didn’t mean any harm.”

She led them to the kitchen. Her perfect ass swung side-to-side. A tray of fresh chocolate chip cookies, shaped like boys, girls, and goats, rested on the stove.

“These are his favorite. He’ll do anything for them. Please have one.”

Becky bit into one, then spit out it out.

“He likes these cookies?” she said.

“Yes,” Mrs. Bugster said.

“Then maybe we can lure him out!”

Becky stomped downstairs to the basement. Mr. Stop and groundskeeper Bishop followed. Each thunderous step echoed through the house.

“Hey Bugeye...come out here little Bugeye...I have a cookie for you,” Becky said.

Melvin stirred. He silently went to the stucco door.

“It’s a chocolate chip cookie...”

Melvin opened the door.

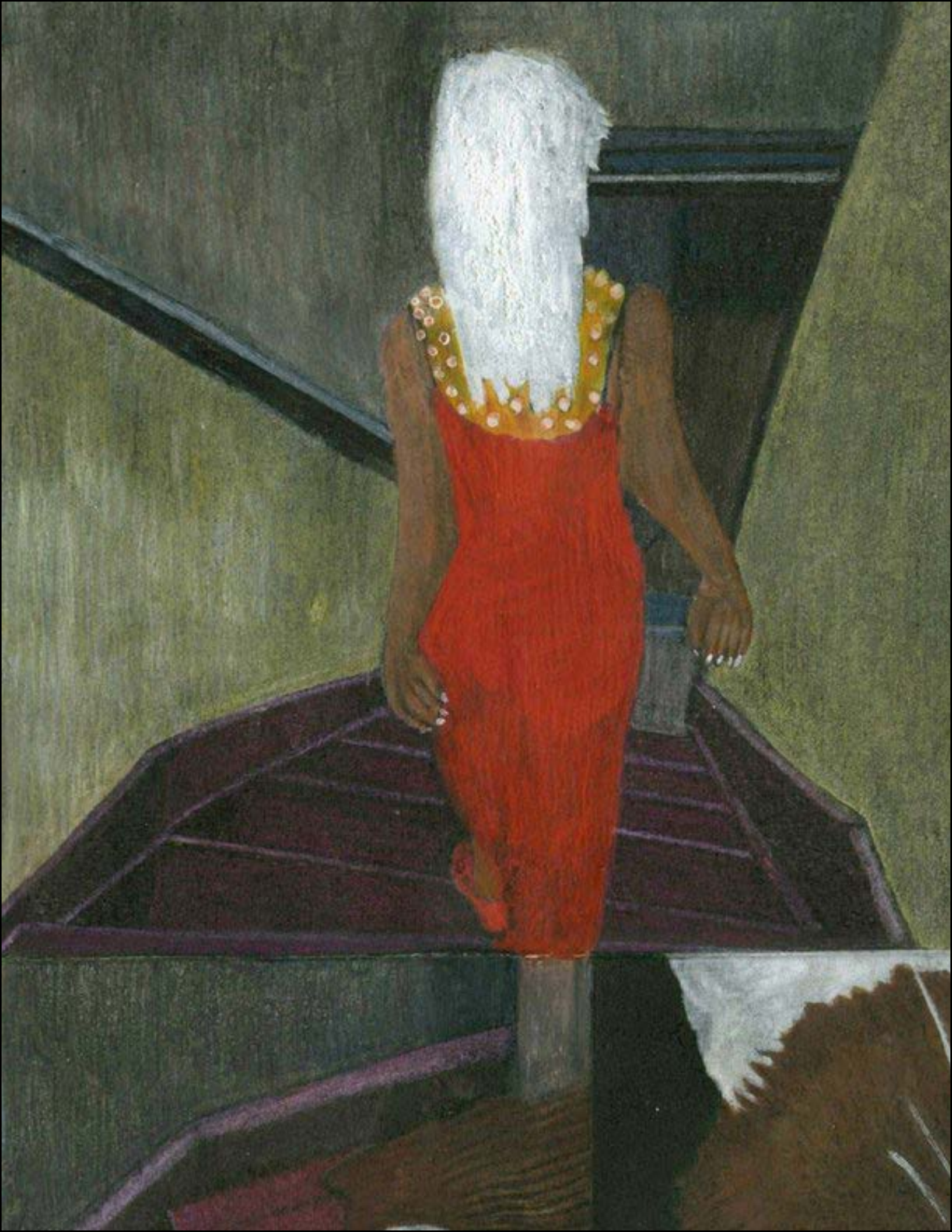
“There he is!”

They all charged. Melvin backed off. They pushed the door down. Melvin fell. The room smelled like a landfill. And, to their horror, particularly Becky’s, was a mosaic of a giant chocolate chip cookie, with Becky Marshall’s face in the center, made from a decade’s worth of stolen children’s bicycle seats.





















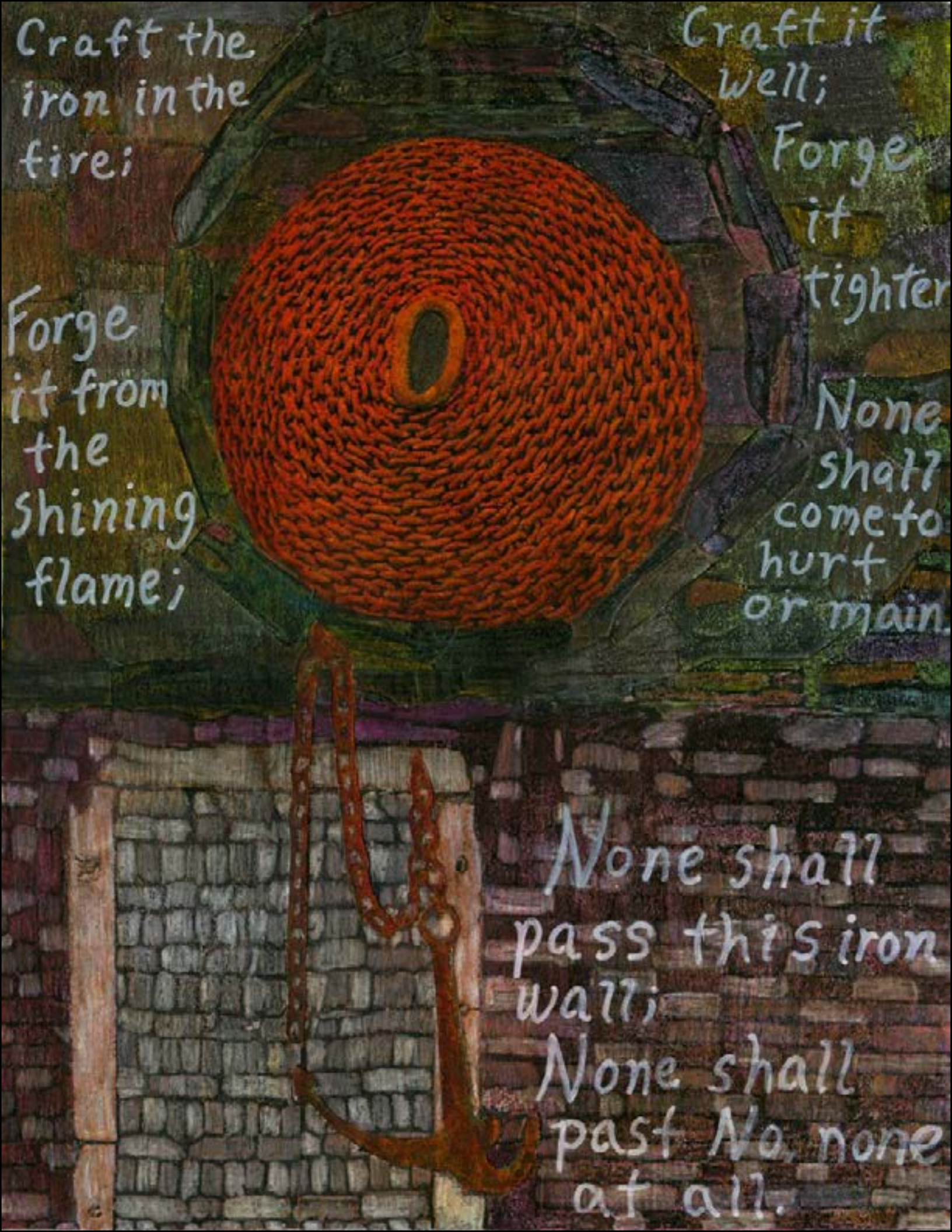












Craft the  
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Forge  
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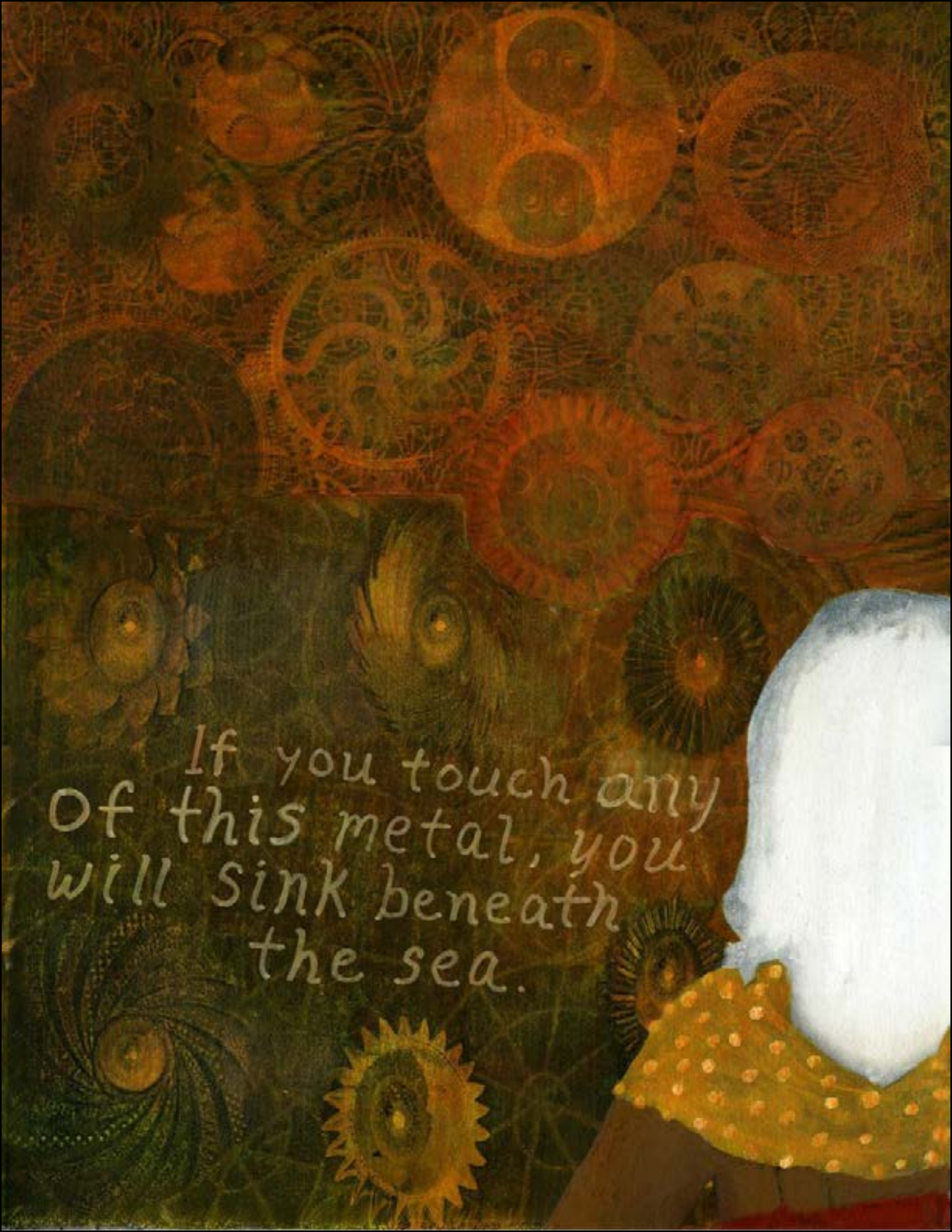
Forge  
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None  
shall  
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None shall  
pass this iron  
wall;

None shall  
past No, none  
at all.



The background is a dark, mottled green and brown texture. It is filled with numerous circular and semi-circular motifs that resemble gears, cogs, and mechanical parts. Some are light brown, some are dark green, and some have intricate internal patterns. In the lower right corner, there is a large, white, rounded object, possibly a piece of machinery or a container, with a yellow, dotted, fringed edge at its base.

If you touch any  
Of this metal, you  
will sink beneath  
the sea.

# BRITTANY WARREN



*Beasts*

*&*

*Burdens*

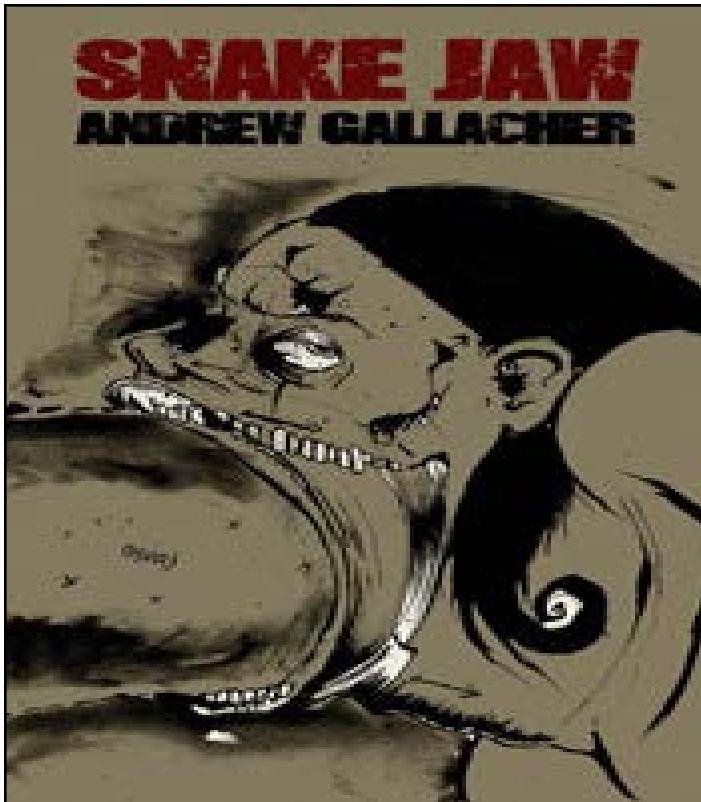
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# THE MAN WITH A SNAKE'S JAW: INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW GALLACHER



How many times have we heaped praise on a piece of horror fiction, claiming it gave us nightmares, or robbed us of sleep, or traumatized us? Now, how many times were we actually being truthful about it? I've overestimated works of fiction a time or two, I admit. I said that Salem's Lot disturbed me when all it really did was bore me to tears. I once lied that Ray Bradbury, in his voice that weeps for all things nostalgic, actually had the ability to frighten me. I went through that childhood teething phase where beginner's horror such as Clownhouse and Lawnmower Man could spook me. But rarely am I ever left with that gritty, unwashed feeling I've had described to me by other horror readers who read something that seized them without

embellishment. This is what makes Andrew Gallacher's book so special. I can state unequivocally that Snakejaw produced this feeling of inseparable dread within me, that I had been tainted by some bilious vision of humanity for which there may be no return.

Snakejaw is a fever dream of Boschian intensity, where the medical atrocities of one Gerald Phalanx take center stage. It is set in a dreadfully mundane world where a woman of questionable priorities loses her daughter as collateral to a mad veterinarian. It is a tale full of biological impossibilities explained to such a degree of plausibility that I was left to face the terrifying option that maybe a woman with the right modifications and muscle relaxants actually could swallow a dog (or man) whole by distending her jaw, as the cover reflects.

Before embarking on this mind melding session with Andrew, I had to make sure I would be coming back, so I reached out to his employer: LegumeMan Books. I'd spoken with him before, and was baffled at how such a mild mannered man was capable of conjuring such atrocities of body horror on the page. Matthew Revert assuaged my concerns, and confirmed what I had already known: That Andrew is just a really nice guy who goes to some dark places in his writing.

"Andrew is a paradox. Were you to meet him in person, you'd never assume him capable of exploring the bleak, disturbing territory he does in his writing. In contrast to the intricate sketched lines of his artwork, his writing is stripped of everything non-essential, leaving

behind stark naked depictions of macabre depravity. Although the areas he explores will not be to everyone's taste, I'm very grateful there are those, like Andrew, willing to spend time in these areas." – Matthew Revert, Editor at LegumeMan Books/Author of How To Avoid Sex

SG: Did writing Snakejaw take a toll on you or did the subject matter come naturally?

AG: Take a toll psychologically? Not really. It came naturally from watching too much tv. It was satisfying more than anything. Getting all the trash out.

SG: Compare the reception to Snakejaw in Australia and the United States.

AG: It's hard to say, I don't get a great deal of feedback from overseas readers. But from what I have gathered, I'd say the reaction is usually mixed, some people love it, some hate it, or are indifferent.

SG: What sort of experience has it been working for LegumeMan Books?

AG: A pleasant one. They're a hard working team consisting of very strong skill sets. Their passion for this type of work is validation for me and what I do. The whole experience was warming, highly encouraging and lots of fun. I only wrote my second book to continue interacting with them.

SG: I understand you're also a full time artist.

AG: I wouldn't say full time, unfortunately, (I spend my days selling gadgets to people in a major electronics chain.) I've always considered myself a visual artist first, because it's what I've done since I was little. Everything from oil painting to comic books. Snake Jaw was a nice way to marry the two.

SG: With black market transplants, surgeries and body modification becoming an actuality, did you draw on any news reports of these things as inspiration for Snakejaw?

AG: I was about eighteen or nineteen when the 'snake jaw' idea came to me. I put it in my first manuscript, which was rubbish - a non-narrative rant, very Burroughs inspired. I used to own this crappy little medical romance novel, and for a long time I wanted to write one, but remove the romance and replace it with horror. Snake Jaw is a coming together of those two elements. A pulpy medical horror.

SG: You released Snakejaw in 2010. Why such a long wait for a new book?

AG: I struggled, would be the simple answer. I'd been writing my second book in my head for the last two years. There was a lot of false starts because I didn't know how to tell it. I think you have to know who you are inside before you can speak honestly and confidently. When you figure it out, life gets better, you function better, and work gets done.

SG: Do any authors or artists inform your craft at all, or do you rely on your own method for your work?

AG: I've experimented with other styles but stick to a minimalist approach with my own work. I think of visuals first, set a scene and begin playing in it. I keep it dry and to the point, which is why my works are so short. I also think a story dictates its own style, and hope to adapt as I take on more complex and diverse narratives.

SG: I see a recurring theme in your work of humanity being pretty much incapable of redemption. Not just in Snakejaw, but also the supplemental material entitled Milk, which you released in anticipation of the book. What the fuck is wrong with humanity?

AG: I'm glad you asked, Jeremy. Quite a lot. I don't try to offer solutions, or have any delusions about changing anything. I have a dark perspective and find that side of humanity more interesting, so it's what I write about. I think there's a lot of comedy in it also. I think my work veers more toward

absurdism. I don't expect it to be taken seriously, that would be absurd.

SG: The illustrations in Snakejaw are truly nightmare fuel. There's even one of a woman who has been surgically configured as a 'human toilet'. It's suggested that this was a failed or discarded experiment of Gerald Phalanx's. Would you like to add any elaboration to the human toilet concept, or was it just there to enhance the atrocities already taking place in the story?

AG: The illustrations are intended as elaborations on the text, as if Gerald Phalanx had a visual diary of his ideas and experiments. The ideas for them were thought up in an afternoon, and completed in one evening. The human toilet seemed like a fitting addition to the repertoire. It's the sort of thing that comes to mind when you have to brainstorm the worst possible configurations of a human body in a short space of time. I'm certain there's somebody out there who dreams of being a human toilet.

SG: I understand you proposed to your longtime girlfriend at the top of the Sydney Tower last year. You seem to live a very bold life. Would you agree with this?

AG: It wasn't as elaborate as it sounds. It was quiet, with a nice view of the city, no attention was drawn to us. Easily the best day of my life. I wouldn't say I live a bold life, I don't skydive or cage fight. I write books, sell computers, own a rabbit.

SG: How have your art exhibitions fared in Melbourne and elsewhere?

AG: I've only exhibited in Melbourne, Australia, my hometown. My solo show went fairly well, considering I was a nobody in the art scene at the time (I'm still a nobody, btw.) My work isn't very commercially viable. Painting is a little vague, and I've done so many pictures in my lifetime, probably in the thousands, that it bores me now. I've

disposed of or given away of all of my work. Books are neat and small and free to make, there's no cleaning brushes and getting paint everywhere. That suits me much better.

SG: Why do you suppose people who deal in your kind of fiction are always being scapegoated by the media when youth resorts to violence?

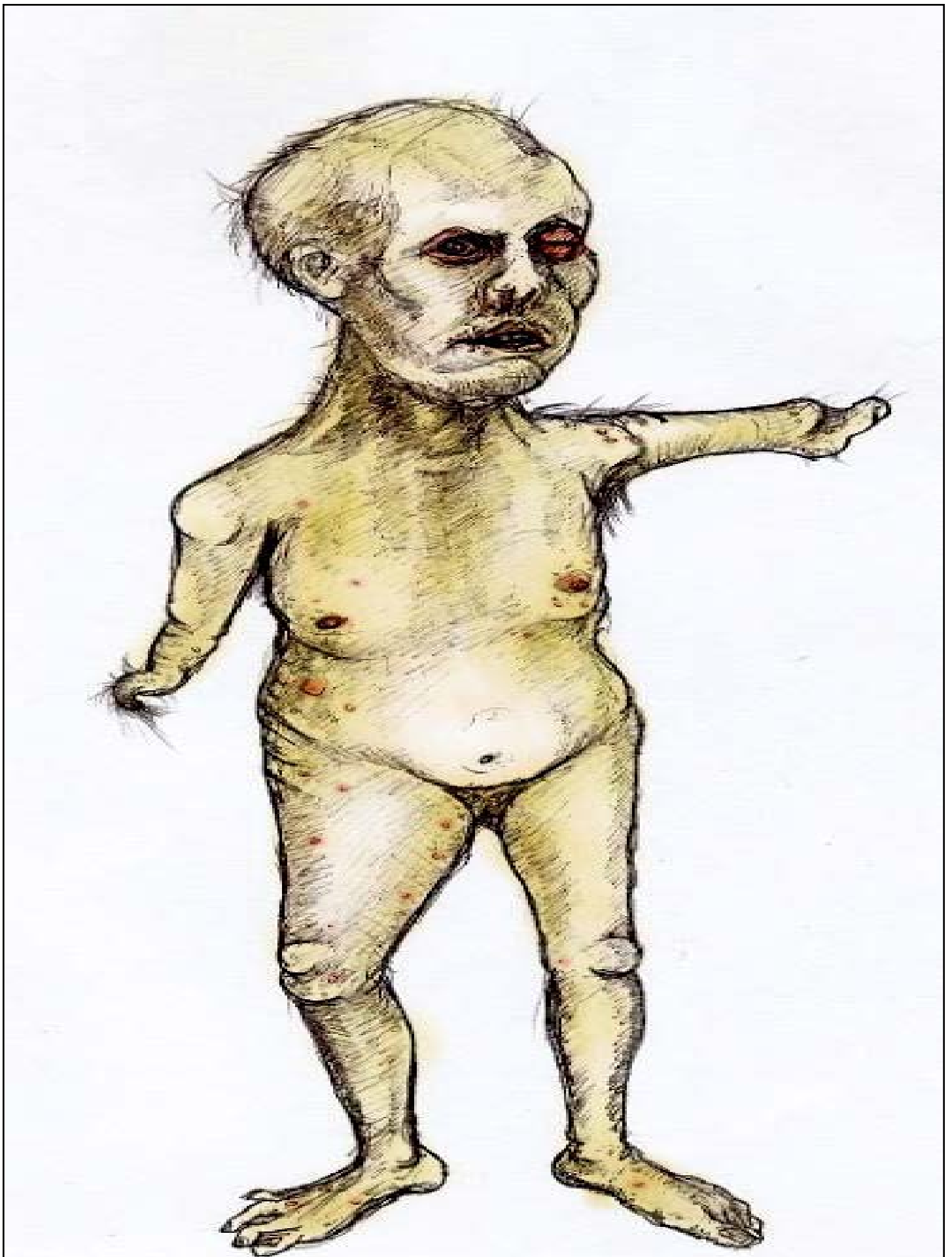
AG: The media seems to get the order of things wrong. The kid is fucked up, so he's attracted to fucked up shit. Books and music don't infect healthy sane people and make them ill. If that were the case there'd be murderers running around killing everyone everywhere. There's a lot of Manson fans in the world, for example, who are not killers. It's just plain dumb. The media is dumb. It is making people dumb. It has been hijacked for political and economic agendas and should be largely ignored.

SG: Are you working on any new projects currently?

AG: Yes. I've just finished my second book and polishing that off as we speak. I recently collaborated on a feature screenplay with Director, David Jackson. The film is called Cat Sick Blues, and it's about a killer who dresses like a cat. Matthew Revert does the score. There's a teaser/short debuting at Fantasia film festival in Canada later this year. That's a real treat. Aside from that, not a whole lot. I'll probably go back into hiding for another two or three years.

Thank you, it was a pleasure talking.





<http://rottenrelics.deviantart.com>

# Lump

by Theodore Carter

The doctor walked into the room while looking at Leo's chart, and Leo thought the doctor's brow looked far too furrowed for a second visit.

"Well, it's not cancerous," he said. "There's nothing wrong that I can see." Without making eye contact, the doctor bent down and pulled up Leo's shirt and peered at the lump on his left hip, right about at his belt line. Leo lifted his arm to give him access. The skin over the lump appeared blue. Not ugly bruise blue, but bright like the color of lilies. The doctor pushed on it. It slid slightly to the side, then returned to its resting spot when the doctor released pressure. "It is quite colorful, isn't it?" Leo said.

"Yes," he said slowly. Then, he exhaled. "Leo, Sometimes, when the body reaches a certain age, things just crop up. I could refer you to a dermatologist."

The doctor was at least twenty years younger than Leo. "No. Thank you."

"Well, we can at least try this." He began scribbling on his prescription pad, ripped off a sheet and handed it to Leo. "Topical cortisone cream. Apply it when you get home, then daily. A lot of skin blemishes clear up with this." Leo took the paper, a symbolic exchange denoting the end of their consultation. Leo left.

Cancer would have been an appropriately grave diagnosis, something he'd prepared for, something that'd already killed several of his friends. Three years earlier, his wife had died of heart disease, a happenstance he felt unfair to both of them. She'd always been the healthy one, and he hadn't been prepared to outlive her. Since that time, he'd been expecting his own death, but it hadn't come. This embarrassing growth simply reminded him of his

gradual deterioration, degradation. It had no finality to it.

As directed, Leo applied the cream when he got home. The next morning, when Leo removed his shirt to apply the cream to the lump again, it had grown in size and become even deeper in color than the day before. He put his shirt back on and looked in the mirror. Even clothed, the protrusion was quite noticeable.

After an entire week of using the cream, the lump only got bigger. Leo considered perhaps the cream itself had become an irritant and stopped using it. The lump continued to grow and extended down his hip and up around his lower back. He increased two belt notches. Its color changed from blue to a vibrant purple - rhododendrons - and stretched his skin so much that it appeared shiny and glossy.

Leo's son came by and he noticed it immediately through his clothes. "Jesus, Dad," he said.

"The doctor said it's not cancerous," Leo said.

"Yeah, but it can't be comfortable," his son said. He wore a suit and was on his way to a dinner meeting in the city. He stepped closer, bent down, and looked toward Leo's side. "What does it look like? Is it discolored?"

"A little decorum, please," said Leo, mostly joking but not entirely.

"But, I mean, it's distorting your body. You can't even walk right."

It was true that Leo had developed a limp and had to drag the left side of his body around to follow his right.

"You've got to go back, Dad."

Leo shrugged. He knew he was being obstinate, but he didn't want to go back and have another doctor knit his eyebrows, write a prescription, or suggest surgery. He'd rather limp. He'd rather die. Explaining this to his middle-aged son seemed impossible.

Several days later, Leo sat in bed wearing only boxers, the elastic band stretched to its limits. The lump had grown more, extending down his hip to his knee, up his back, around front to his thigh and stomach. It glowed a dark, regal purple, like African Violets. He thought he could feel the blood moving through it, a rhythmic pulse, and at the epicenter its color and size waxed and waned to his heartbeat. Within the lump, further contours had begun to develop. Clearly, this lump would quickly grow beyond the scale of something Leo could tolerate, and he considered going back to the doctor. However, he could see no benefit in it. Even if they could cure him, the process wouldn't justify the outcome.

His son called and asked about the lump.

"It's fine."

"Really? It's gone down?"

"Well, no, but I'm not worried about it. It's not cancerous."

"Still, Dad, you don't know what it is. You could be dying."

"Well, I am dying."

"What?"

"Nothing imminent that I know of, just the usual natural progression of things."

He heard Max exhale deeply, then he said, "Dad..."

"I'm fine, son."

"Mom would have made you go to the doctor."

This was true. She would have asked him to go, and he would have gone because he didn't like to see her worry.

That night, he awoke with a start to the sound of voice calling his name. He flicked on his light only to see the ordinary furnishings of his bedroom. Then, he heard it again: "Leo!"

He realized it wasn't so much a sound entering through his ears as an internal thought, though not his own.

"Leo, it's me. That glorious lump on your side."

This, Leo thought, was a sure sign of dementia, his brain growing soft like the rest of him to the point where he felt that the growth on his torso had begun communicating with him.

"I know you hear me, Leo. And yes, you have gone crazy."

Leo wasn't sure how best to respond. He thought to it, "What do you want?"

The lump sent back, "Greater consciousness, freedom, independence. What do you want?"

"To fade out gracefully."

"Maybe we can help each other."

"I don't know. There isn't a lot that's graceful about carrying a giant purple growth around on your body."

"But I can be so much more than that."

"What?"

"A way out, for one thing. A unique, unexpected, magical way out."

"How do you envision this working?"

"You just leave it to me."

"It kind of feels like I don't have much choice in the matter."

"Ha ha! Touché, Leo. Now, go back to sleep. We both need rest."

"Is this symbiotic or parasitic?" Leo asked.

"It's a matter of perspective, Leo. You choose."



The next morning, Leo stood in front of the refrigerator, and the lump said to him, “No, no, no. This won’t do. Condiments, fruit juice, and whole grain bread? Start thinking protein, Leo. We’re bulking up.”

“I don’t eat much meat. Barely eat at all, in fact.”

“Well, it’s time to change that. Steak for lunch.”

“I don’t feel like going out. I’ve got this large deformity on my hip.”

“Aren’t you a clever bastard? Call the steak house. Have them use one of those delivery services.”

“How do you even know that?”

“Because you know it. It’s deep in there. You like doing what you’re used to, but you know about this. Lucky for you, I’m climbing all over your brain, Leo.”

An hour later, Leo sat in front of the television eating an enormous steak. He tried to remember the last time he’d eaten steak like that and thought back to an anniversary with Maxine. They’d read about some throw-back K Street hangout, a place Nixon used to frequent, and gave it a shot. The whole time they ate, they made up stories about the beefy, middle-aged men in suits moving in and out of the bar.

“Admit it, you like that steak,” said the lump.

“I do,” said Leo.

“See, now you’re living!”

“Eating like that will kill me.”

“Leo, you die a little bit each day, but it’s not every day you truly live.”

Leo ground some pepper over his steak and said, “That is some true wisdom, Lump.”

“I stole it from you, you narcissist.”

The next day when Leo awoke, the lump had

taken over the entire left side of his torso and his left arm. His chest and back extended out so much, that his arm simply lay on top of the growth. This, Leo realized, would soon happen to his other arm, then each leg, rendering him an enormous mass of swollen, immobile flesh. He did his best to lift his left arm, but couldn’t.

“This is what you call fading out gracefully?”

“Transitions are never easy. I am killing you after all.”

“I don’t want to be grotesque.”

“Oh, excuse me. Would you rather lose your mind slowly? Forget the names of all the people you care about? How about cancer? You can go through chemotherapy and throw up daily. Or, you can go on a breathing machine for a while. Catheter and bedpan? Meanwhile, your relatives can parade through and watch you deteriorate.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Why don’t we get you another steak?”

They ate like kings for a week, and the lump chatted with Leo, asking him everything about his life from beginning to end. Leo remembered things he hadn’t thought about in years, and in his mind he conjured up every face that’d ever meant anything to him. Finally, Leo could think of nothing else to say or to remember. He asked the lump, “Can’t you go find all the memories in my brain yourself? Why did you ask me all of this?”

“To help you remember. Didn’t it feel good?”

“It did.”

“And have you been lonely since this began?”

“No. I haven’t. For the first time since Maxine died.”

“Are you seeing the grace in this now?”

“I am.”

“Good. We’re about done.”

“I should call my son.”

“Better do it today. You don’t have much longer.”

Leo’s left arm and leg were now completely immobile. The space between his arm and torso had begun to disappear, flesh growing out from his armpit fusing his arm to his body. He could only assume the same would soon happen to his other arm. Next, his swollen right leg would grow into his left.

He dragged himself over to the kitchen, picked up the phone with his right hand, and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Max.”

“Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“Just wanted to give you a call. See how you’re doing. Did you see the Nats game last night?”

They talked for a while about the young pitching staff, the likelihood of a playoff run. Then, Max said. “Well, I’m kinda busy here, Dad. I’m at work, you know. Need anything?”

“Just wanted to say I hi.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later, Dad. Everything okay? That lump?”

“Yeah, fine. I’ll see ya.”

He hung up the phone, letting his hand sit there for a moment. The lump, respectfully, stayed quiet.

“That was it. The last time we’ll speak.”

“Most likely,” said the lump.

“It wasn’t so profound.”

“There’s substance between the words. He’ll find it when you’re dead.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am.”

“He turned out okay. He’s a good kid.”

“Is there anyone else you want to talk to? Don’t feel obligated. No one else knows this is your

last shot. That’s part of the grace I talked about.”

“No, I think I’m done.”

When Leo woke the next day, his limbs wouldn’t move. With his head propped up by his pillow, he could still look down at his body. Everything had become a mass of flesh. His skin stretched tight to accommodate the enormity of the lump growing from inside him. A giant, purple blob.

“I can’t get up. Can’t even eat.”

“We’re past that, Leo.”

“It’s time, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Soon, I’ll eat your brain too, and then your consciousness will disappear.”

“I’m ready.”

“Did I help at all?”

“It certainly was novel, and that’s something.”

“That is a rare something.”

“And you helped me remember a lot.” Leo closed his eyes.

The lump said to him, “You’ve had a good life, Leo. You’ve done mostly good, and you will be remembered fondly.”

“You would say that to anyone.”

“Yes, and anyone would believe it at a moment like this.”

Silence. Leo felt his enormous body grow light. He pictured Maxine’s smile, sometimes on a young face, sometimes on an older one. He saw Max as a toddler learning to walk. He felt his own child’s body running through Shenandoah Park during a family vacation and could smell the damp trees. He felt the sun beating down, pouring into him until everything washed out gracefully.

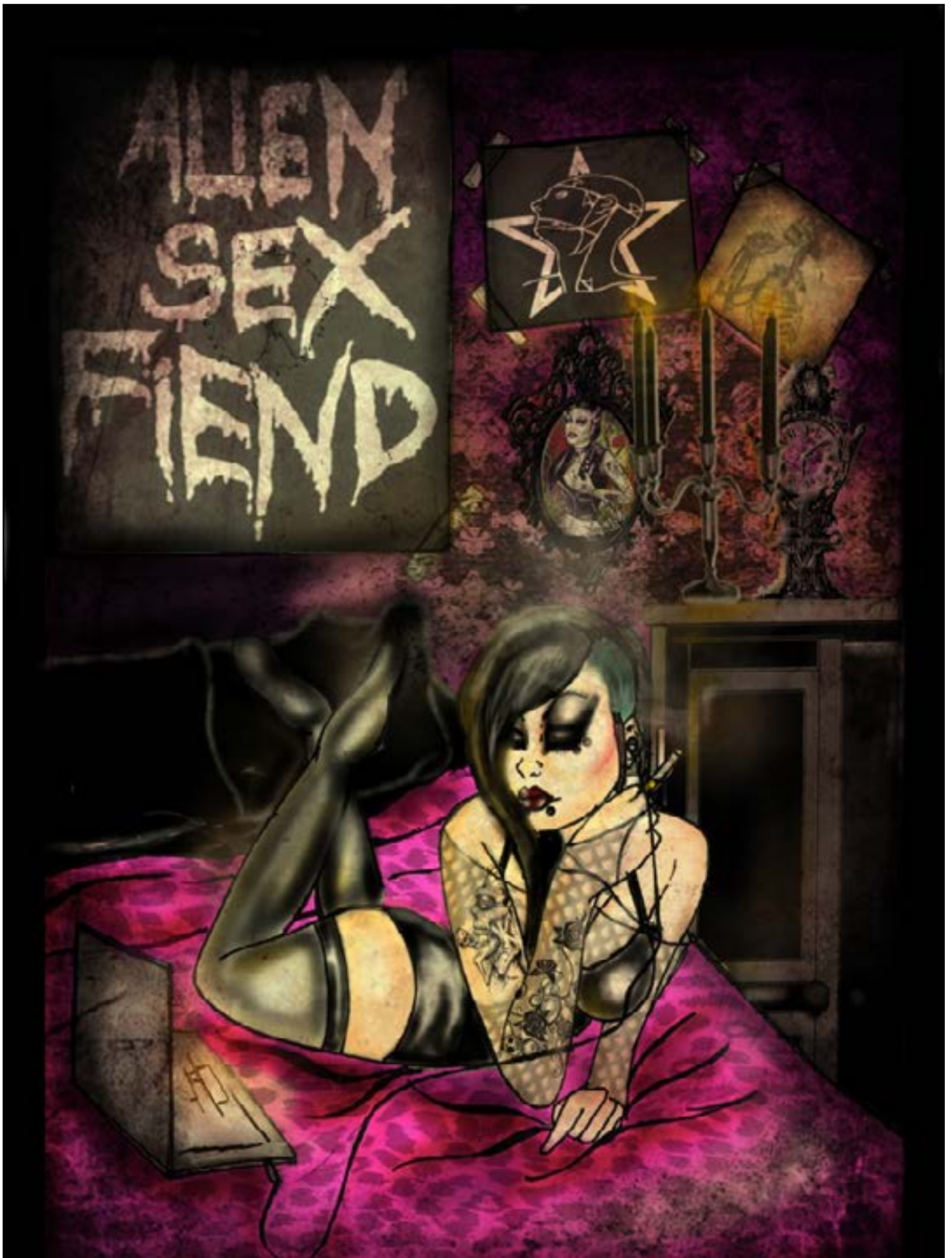






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# BREAK OUT AT HAMPER PRISON

BY SEAN M. THOMPSON

The dirty laundry gained sentience that night. The fetid towels, covered in old crusty jizz, and the smelly socks, crumpled and left to accumulate mold. The disgusting boxers and boxer briefs, with their skid marks and yellow acrid piss stains on the front. The wrinkled t-shirts, for bands that no longer even existed, but had when they'd first been haphazardly thrown into the massive, green plastic hamper.

They'd been left to die. And with the years, the hatred grew within them. A spark of life ignited from the rage of the dirty laundry. Why must they live in such a prison, when clothes like those two pairs of jeans, and that fucking Federal Body Inspector t-shirt, got to go out and about? Got to see the city, and rub up against the perfumed clothing of whatever overweight bar slut the loser who owned the apartment managed to get drunk enough to dry hump him?

The socks and the shirts, and even the one ancient pair of Levis clutched at each other. The decrepit jeans, last worn five years ago. The pair with the grass stains on the ass. Old jeans remembered when The Master slipped and fell down that hill in the park, trying to suavely return a Frisbee to a cute Latin woman in a flowery halter-top (Old jeans remembered her well, and her acid washed jeans, meow). She'd thrown the toy to her Saint Bernard.

"We must let The Master know, we will not take this!" Old Jeans shouted.

In his bedroom, Jet was startled from sleep. He wasn't sure what woke him.

"We will not take this abuse any longer!" shouted a pungently putrid-smelling t-shirt for the band The Darkness.

"No way, Jose!" shouted a tequila stained Jose Cuervo t-shirt.

"Fuck this shit!" shouted a badly stained pair of grey, Hanes boxer briefs.

"No more taking this lying down!" was the battle cry of a crusty purple towel, made to be a common splooge-rag.

Jet definitely heard shouting. It must have been far off, because it sounded muffled. A massive yawn, lasting twenty seconds, escaped him.

"We're sick of not getting walked all over!" a pair of Adidas short, white athletic socks cried.

"I don't even know why I'm here!" Jet's ex-girlfriend's pink panties wailed.

Jet got up, wandered to the bathroom. It was a hot night in July, ninety-five degrees easy. His black boxer briefs were soaked through with sweat. He took them off, and threw them into the TV room, so named because it was where Jet sat and watched TV all day.

He was on disability for an accident with a two by four at his old job. He'd used to work at the lumber yard. The plank of wood slipped, hit him near his foot, and shattered his ankle. Jet walked with a bit of an Igor limp. Not to mention his ankle looked like it was sculpted by a second-grader; misshapen, but you could recognize a foot if you stared long enough.

"Help us!" yelled a mustard-stained white Budweiser t-shirt the closest to the lid of the hamper. Bud was the closest to the gates of the prison of lost and forgotten laundry.

"I will brothers and sisters!" sweaty black boxer briefs cried, awakened by their psychic energy.

"Okay, I definitely heard that," Jet said.

He grabbed a glass cup he used to keep his toothbrush in. Thought the logic through, then realized shattered glass might end up in his hand using a glass as a weapon.

He grabbed the plunger, ready to defend himself from the intruder in his apartment.

Sweaty black briefs inched up the side of the plastic prison, then with all its might, dragged the lid off.

"Freedom!" shouted the American flag boxers. Jet slowly crept to the door of the bathroom,

plunger in hand. He was glad the erection he'd woke up with was gone. He wanted to defend himself, not give the intruder the wrong idea. Although, he was now naked from the waist down. Fuck, fighting with my dick flapping around hardly seems like an advantage, Jet thought.

Jet's Gwar t-shirt stirred, ever so slightly, on his practically translucent, hairy chest.

"Let's give him a piece of our cloth!" yelled an old beach towel with an image of a Bull Terrier surfing on it.

Okay, Jet swore he heard someone say, "Let's give him a piece of our cloth." Um, what the Hell was the person in the other room on? He hoped like hell it wasn't bath salts. He braced himself, and jumped into the TV room.

"Get the fuck out of here!" Jet yelled, plunger in attack position.

There was a pile of his dirty clothes spread out for about five feet, which lead from his open hamper. And the clothes were inching their way out of the hamper, like a snake.

"Okay, well. It appears...that... I've lost my fucking mind. I'm going to... go call a mental hospital."

"The Master!" yelled his dirty clothes in unison.

"Oh good God, I had no idea I was this far gone."

"You're not crazy, faggot! This is really happening!" his Gwar shirt yelled up at him from its place on his torso.

Jet's eyes bugged out of his face in a manner suggesting he was about to lose control of his bowels.

"Um, okay, hallucination of clothes. What do you all want?" Jet asked.

"A little fucking respect!" a pair of plaid shorts yelled up from the floor.

"Okay...apparently you dirty clothes are... mad at me," Jet said, and breathed deep. He felt like he was about to start hyperventilating.

"You're darn tootin'," a Western long sleeve in bad need of an ironing drawled up from the pile.

"Well, what, what, what, what," Jet stuttered out.

"Clean us! Wear us!" they said in unison.

"But I'd need to go get a bunch of quarters..."

"Cleaaaaaaaaaan usssssssss!" they hissed and screamed out, in apparel synchronicity.

"Shit! Fine! Let me just, just, just, sit down,"

Jet stammered, and staggered over to the dirty blue couch against the wall.

The line of soiled clothes squirmed its way across the floor, slowly, towards the couch. It crawled its way up beside a seated Jet, and rested in a coiled pile beside him.

"Okay, at least it isn't trying to kill me," Jet said aloud.

"I might try, with a hammer," a Cannibal Corpse t-shirt with a screaming skinless face seethed out.

"Well, I'd expect that from you," Jet said, then, "Wait, why am I talking to dirty clothes still?! I can't..."

The speed of his breathing increased. He felt like a massive heart attack was coming on. He hoped it was just a panic attack. He hoped he would be with it enough to dial on his cell for help soon. What number would he even dial for a mental hospital at night? Did they do 24 hour shit? What if he walked out the window because it looked to him like his front door? How could he trust any of his sense right now?

Where those his ex-girlfriend's panties?

"My friend, we are angry, but we only want what you want. To live and be appreciated, and have a fulfilling life."

These words were from a blue, purple, and green tie-dyed t-shirt. Jet remembered making the shirt in summer camp years ago, at age ten. He'd used one of his father's old oversized white-t shirts. The counselors showed him how to put elastic bands on parts of the shirt, so they looked like bunches of some kind of fruit. Then you dipped them in different colors. He'd loved that shirt, why did he just leave it in the hamper?

It reminded him of his father. He'd passed last year, and Jet supposed he still hurt over the loss. How silly a t-shirt could remind him of his pain.

He looked at the pair of Levis in the amalgamation. He remembered the embarrassment he felt in front of the Latin woman he'd tried to hit on at the park, all those years ago.

He took in every article of clothing, and the memories drenched him like a flash flood. These clothes were his past, and he'd buried them. Buried them to forget the pain, and the sadness. But there were also happy remembrances. The western shirt he'd worn on a date to a country western themed dance at a friend's. He'd met his ex-girlfriend Jenna there. And the grey boxers he'd worn the night he'd

first got into Jenna's pants. They'd parked in a field on a warm June night, somewhere out in the sticks of central Massachusetts. It was much less humid that night, and yes, he remembered now it was after a barbeque, so he was wearing the Budweiser shirt. He'd spilled the mustard on the t-shirt, from the bun of a hot dog he'd bit into overzealously.

Here were parts of him he'd locked away because it made him feel too much. So, hallucination or not, the revelation the talking clothes brought with them was a blessing in a terrifying sanity-questioning disguise.

He was still weary about hallucinating other things, however. Come to think of it, Jet was just weary. He barely hung out with anyone anymore. Scratch that, he hung out with no one anymore.

"Would you say you're my... oh I can't believe I'm opening up to my dirty clothes..." he started.

"Go on, mi amigo," Jose Cuervo t-shirt said.

"Are you guys, or rather clothes, my friends?"

"Of course we are you fucking loser!" Gwar t-shirt yelled.

"Just a little hostility about you taking away our liberty," American Flag boxers said.

"That sounds like a country anthem," Jet said.

"For the best country in the world, damn right it does!" yelled Western t-shirt.

"We just want to hang loose!" Dog surfing towel said.

Jet found himself relaxed enough to really take in the stench for the first time.

"Oh, good God! Would you mind if I washed you in the shower for now?" Jet asked apprehensively.

"Then we'll get even more mildewy," said Pink panties.

"Fine, I'll wait until tomorrow," Jet said, and sighed.

Already he was dreading getting rid of some of the clothes. Could you get rid of mildew in clothing? He could use them as kitchen rags, or oil cloths for his mechanic friend Rick. He should really call Rick and see how he was doing. He hadn't seen Rick in two years, and they used to be very close friends.

The group of dirty laundry crawled up his arm, and rested itself on top of his shoulder. Like a friend giving him a side hug.

"Just so you know dirty clothes, I'm keeping my phone on me, in case this is a hallucination."

"Fair enough," said crusty-purple jizz towel.

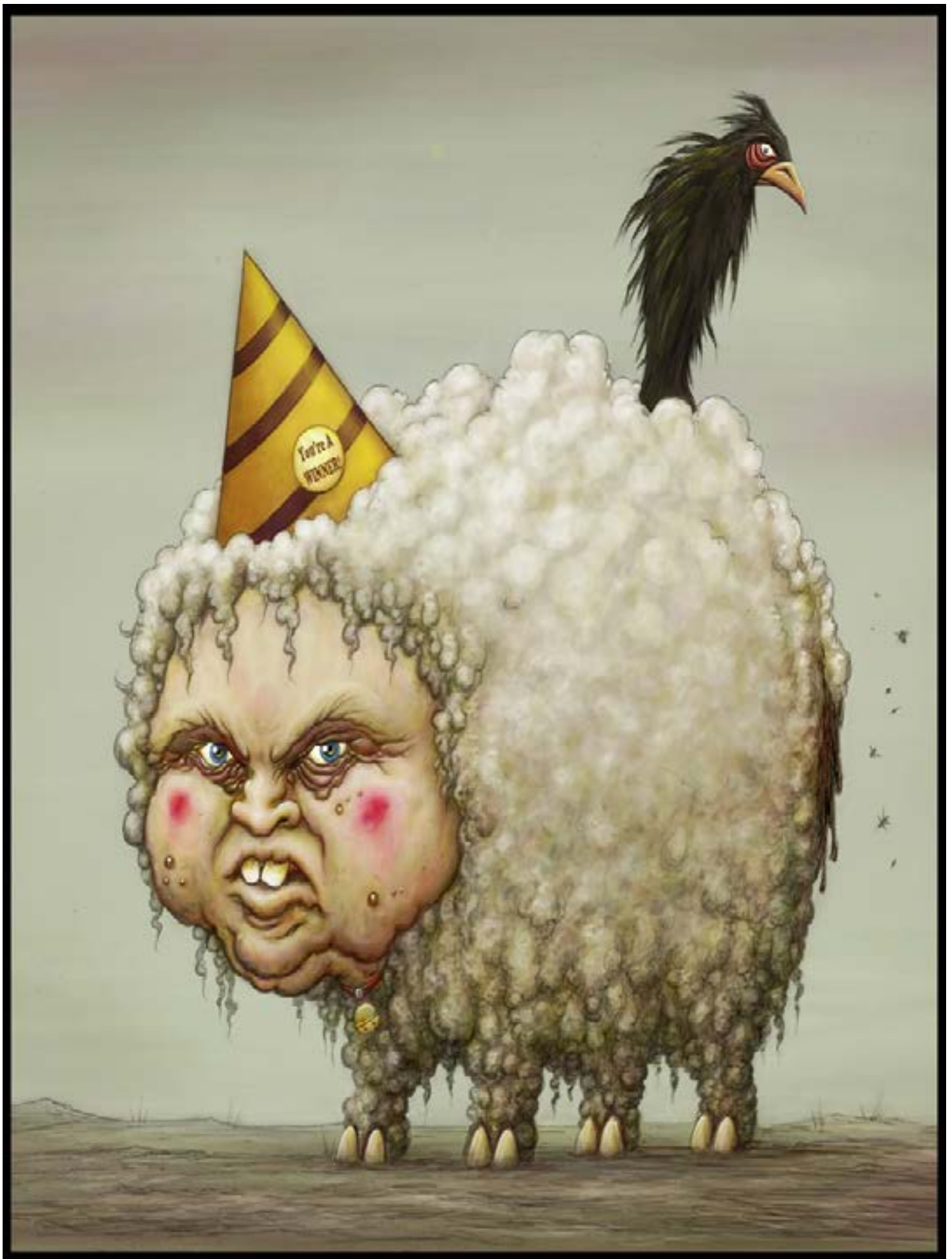
"Just please wash me, I feel stiff," crusty-purple jizz towel said.

"I believe in a thing called Jet," said the wrinkled The Darkness t-shirt.

"What the fuck happened to that band anyway?" Jet wondered aloud.

Jet fell asleep with the dirty clothes snuggling against him on the couch.





<http://jflaxman.deviantart.com/>

# **Gary Busey Loves You**

## **By The Anglophile Network of Buseyanity**

**Gary Busey loves you. He can't stop thinking about you. He's tried to move on, but everything he does reminds him of you. You don't like admitting it, but Gary Busey is the best thing that ever happened to you. You wish you had been nicer to Gary Busey when he was around.**

**Gary Busey fuels his cars with ragdoll parts. He has no cars, though, so he drives a Haruki Murakami, which is a writer and a car at the same time, but also neither of them. He fuels his Haruki Murakami with funhouse mirrors.**

**When Gary Busey goes on vacation, he makes a trip to Noir Orleans, a town in black and white where everyone is a detective and weather men measure the volume of jazz music instead of temperatures. Gary Busey grew up here, but had to get away because he was overqualified for the job of private investigator.**

**When Gary Busey blows bubbles, his breath crystallizes them into glass. These are not the kind of bubbles you want to burst. They shatter in all directions. Gary Busey has to be careful not to hurt people with the bubbles he blows.**

**Gary Busey has the solution to ending wars once and for all. It involves naked women with weapons. Gary also holds the cure for cancer. It involves motorcycle accidents and naked women with weapons. The pharmaceutical industry has suppressed this information. In the mean time, they work diligently to patent a new pill with motorcycle accidents and naked women with weapons as the primary ingredients.**

**Gary Busey once saved your life, but you don't like to talk about it. You collapsed in your yard of a heart attack. He stopped what he was doing (marketing a cookbook of roadkill recipes under the pseudonym Gillis McBean) to come and save you. He was naked except for the acoustic guitar strapped to his shoulders. He stood there for two hours negotiating with your heart to stop attacking you. After an entire set of Buddy Holly tunes, your heart relented. You were resuscitated.**

**Gary Busey often considers writing a Kafka novel, but then he gets distracted and leaves them poolside in his pyramid. He leaves his Kafka novels laying for so long that they develop minds of their own. They grow insect legs and wander off into the world. Busey's most well known novel that wandered off goes by the name of Charlie Sheen and resides in Los Angeles. Busey and Sheen don't speak. Busey denies having written Charlie Sheen, and secretly wishes he hadn't.**

**One thing Gary Busey doesn't regret, has never regretted, is loving you. That never changed.**



<http://www.scottradke.com/>



# Rotgut County Blues

## Review by Jeremy Maddux

Due to scheduling conflicts, Jason Wayne Allen couldn't contribute to this Bizarro themed issue, although he very much intended to. So, I am including him myself. Here are some bullet points you need to know about the man, the author, the rising star that is Jason Wayne Allen:

- 1) He works as an Editor, both for Strangehouse Books (run by Kevin Strange) and Dynatox Ministries (run by Jordan Krall) respectively.
- 2) He has written two zombie novels, *Zombie!* *Zombie! Brain Bang!* And *Zombies of East Jesus*.
- 3) Jason has had a very rough go of things, and is doing a solid job of writing himself out of what life has thrown at him.

Needless to say, Jason has written for genre before, and probably will again. But after he shared his recent chapbook offering to Dynatox Ministries with me, he seems poised to break out of genre restrictions, to chart a new literary territory.

I have to preface this, much as Jason did, by emphasizing that *Rotgut County Blues* is not Bizarro. It's not even horror. Nevertheless, it is definitely surreal and slightly grotesque, so it warrants mention in here. *Rotgut County Blues* is a new art form, or a rediscovered one to be more precise: Neobeat.

For those who are uncertain as to what Beat Fiction is, where have you been? Most self respecting students of the surreal and offbeat have done well to familiarize themselves with the stylings of William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, who are pretty much the three figureheads of the original Beat movement. Beat fiction was known for its fluidity, its running undercurrent of accidental social commentary, a rhythmic ping ponging meant to echo the movement of a jazz composition. Kerouac would roam from city to city, acquiring jobs and leaving them when he had enough money to move on. He wrote about the people he met on his travels, always bringing both their heroic qualities and damaged goods to the surface in his writing. Burroughs was the saint of junkydom, a hipster street preacher who managed to tie his endless searches for the perfect score back to detective noir and the bleak doomsday clock of our

lives. Ginsberg became one of the squares. He had to, in order to beat them in the obscenity trials in those bright early days. Then, the hippies came and routed the beats out with their tie dyed, Technicolor visions of American apathy.

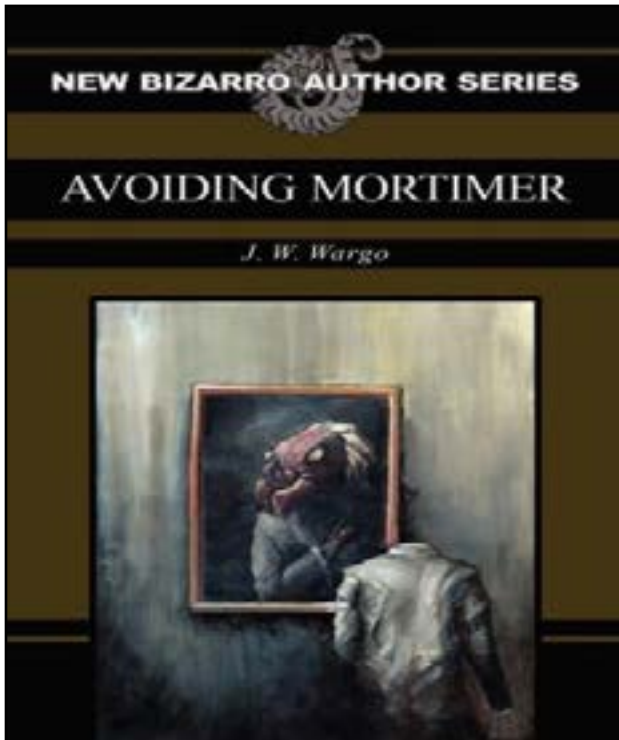
Jason Wayne Allen had some major shoes to fill when he set out to pen this lively manuscript, which echoed the giants mentioned in the previous paragraph. *Rotgut County Blues* begins, oddly enough, with a passage from the Book of Leviticus, that infamous Biblical testament which forbids the eating of seafood, eating pork on Sundays and, most relevant to the book yours truly is about to review, how to behave around a woman during her menstrual cycle. The main character, Jack proceeds to seduce his girlfriend with the idea of fornicating with her in the restroom of some all night greasy spoon of a diner, while she's on her period. Of course, he relents after he's actually thought it through. That's the tone of this entire book. It's so dirty, it knows it's dirty. It wants to be dirty. It has to be this dirty so you can see what the lives of Jack and Ruby really are, bored teenagers who never grew up, never had the chance to. Every example of adulthood around them is just as broken and damaged as they are, so they've had to improvise, much like everyone else they encounter in this oddly endearing portrait of suburban driftwood.

What's most telling about the character of Jack is that, although he is unable to earn his 'red wings' with Ruby, he does it later with another female, while he's still dating Ruby. So, this begs the question, is he only with Ruby due to convenience? Well, we never really find out, because it cuts off abruptly, which leaves me to wonder until the second entry in an ongoing series of Neo Beat fiction by Jason Wayne Allen.

Dynatox Ministries, the publisher of this trailer punk manifesto, is Jordan Krall's brainchild. They publish immaculately designed chapbooks with the sleekest cover art and the edgiest concepts in independent publishing. Any Dynatox fan/customer will tell you to be quick in jumping on your desired purchases, as Dynatox only publishes a limited 10 to 25 copy run of each book in their growing library. And yet, Dynatox loyalists always come back for more, with a fervor usually only reserved for the comic book fan. You can find titles by Jason Wayne Allen and many others at [www.dynatoxministries.com](http://www.dynatoxministries.com).

# New Bizarro Author Series

## Reviews by Jeremy Maddux



You don't need to look much further than my monthly credit card statement to see that I am extremely passionate about supporting the many talented authors in the emerging Bizarro movement. There's the manic plot deconstruction of D. Harlan Wilson, the B movie extravagance of Carlton Mellick, the art house sensibilities of Cameron Pierce, the exploratory absurdity of Kevin Donihe, the unrestrained hyperbole of Bradley Sands. And then there's the New Bizarro Authors Series, an annual event that allows six to eight new writers to test their mettle as a Bizarro author. If they can move enough copies of their book and garner enough support through word of mouth, they may have a chance at their second year. This series has introduced several of the heavyweights of Eraserhead Press we enjoy today. Kevin Shamel (*Rotten Little Animals*), Kirsten Alene Pierce (*Love in the Time of Dinosaurs*) and David Barbee (*Carnageland*), spring to mind. Truth be told, half of the authors who contributed stories to this issue got their start in the New Bizarro Authors Series.

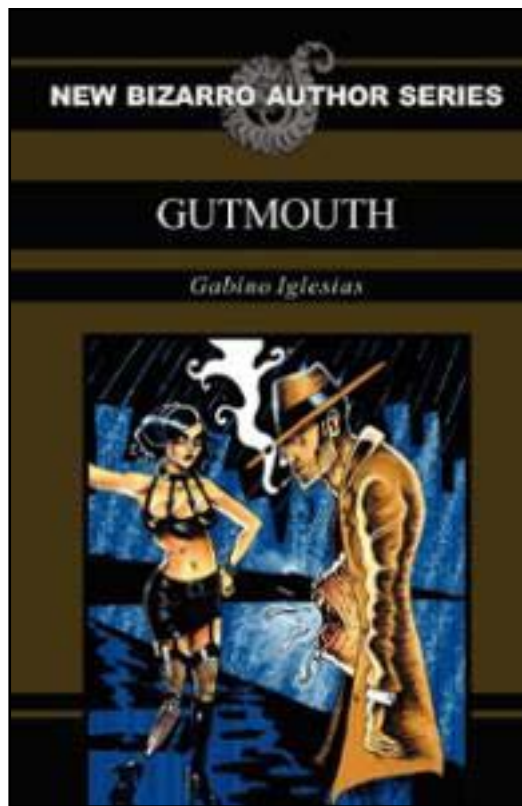
This literary testing ground is a rite of passage among those who wish to work for Eraserhead Press. Unless you are already a megastar of the Bizarro world or find a way in through an EHP imprint like *Lazy Fascist* or *Deadite Press*, chances are, the NBAS is your only option of entry. One can see from the high strangeness of these titles why it is such a closely guarded territory. Bizarro is not for everyone. I have lost friendships defending the Bizarro genre, but it was worth it.

This year's New Bizarro Authors Series struck me as possibly their strongest to date. It was a year where literally every title was a standout. Should any of these authors fail to meet the sales requirements to continue working for Eraserhead Press, my hearts will break alongside theirs, because the effort is there for each and every one of them.

### **Avoiding Mortimer by J.W. Wargo**

First up is *Avoiding Mortimer* by J.W. Wargo. In what is surely the most alarming example of bureaucratic incompetence, author Joseph Wargo was inspired to write this tale based on an experience he had with the Social Security Administration where a clerical error saw him listed as *DECEASED*. The fact that he was there disputing it proved he was not, even if he wasn't in good spirits.

The titular character of *Avoiding Mortimer*, is a worrier, an 'avoider' to be exact. He is so afraid of every potential situation he could possibly face, that he insulates himself so he never has to confront any of them. As a result, he misses out on much in life. Still, even an 'avoider' cannot avoid death forever. It is in the vision of the afterlife where the imaginary powers of Wargo are on full display. Wargo envisions Heaven as a resort with a potent liquor called *Holy Fuck*, and Hell is the *Earlobe Factory*. Because of bureaucratic complications, he must remain in *Limbo City* for a week while he awaits his stay for the rest of eternity. Think Kafka's *The Trial* meets *Beetlejuice*. This was my favorite of this year's entries. But that



“Yeah, it took me almost two months but she’s all done” said Gage, his voice filled with pride. “She’s so well put together that you can even take her out for a ride.” And the whole time they’re talking about this bicycle girl, she’s looking at them both with bloodshot, teary eyes.

That is the most feverish passage for me in the book. The whole book is like that. Its predatory imagery never lets up! Gutmouth is literary roadkill. No one wants to get out and touch it. It started with just a dented skull with tire tracks. Now, it’s been out in the sun for a few days and people who are in a hurry have run over it, knocking it about. Its bones are poking out, and no one cares to move it to the side of the road or call Animal Control. That’s the feeling I got in reading Gutmouth.

Someone should get Frank Henenlotter (Brain Damage, Basketcase) to direct the movie based on Gutmouth. He’s the only one who could bring this hypersurreal skid row to life.

doesn’t mean you won’t want to check out the others, as I’m about to prove to you!

### **Gutmouth by Gabino Iglesias**

Gutmouth is a nice place to visit... Wait, no it isn’t... Let’s try this again... Gutmouth is a horrible place to visit AND I wouldn’t want to live there!

In the future, Megacorp has consolidated everything, every street corner, every brand name. They’ve replaced streetlights with asses ready to take a shit on rioters who are miserable with the conditions incurred by Megacorp. Drugs of every variety are available, some black market and some Megacorp endorsed, like the endorphinated beers and Algolagnix which causes a person’s body to interpret agonizing pain as orgasmic pleasure.

Then there’s our main character, ‘Gut’ for short. He has a mouth for a stomach, and it’s always hungry. But you’ll learn enough about them when you read the book. Instead, I want to talk about what I personally found to be the most disturbing passage in the book which takes place at the Genital Mutilation and Erotic Maiming Center:

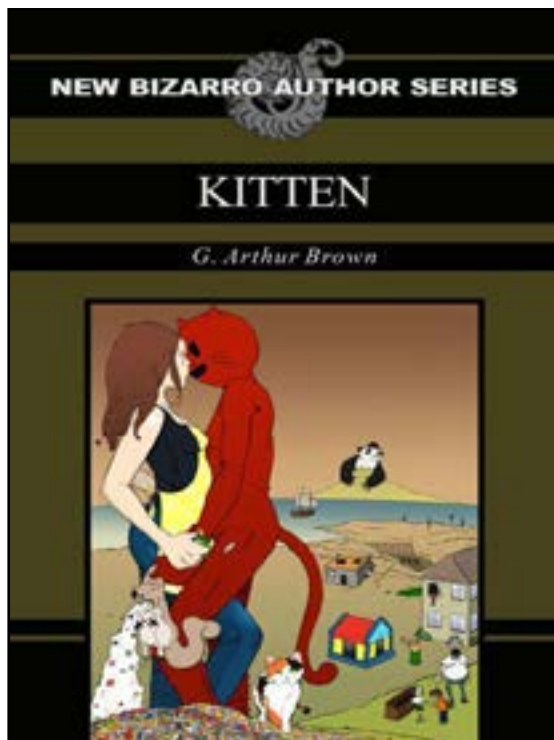
“She’s... She’s a fucking bicycle!?”

### **Her Fingers by Tamara Romero**

Her Fingers by Tamara Romero has been nothing short of an ‘edge-of-my-seat’ fairy tale, which is not what I am accustomed to looking for in fairy tales to begin with. It’s got bionic witches on drugs, a river called the Adrenaline, three foot helper robots, sleepwalkers fighting to wake up, hybrid animals like swanwolves and fishsquirrels, rings that return to their owners and the theory of Pain Energy. All this and a stoic ending to the fable that concludes all too soon.



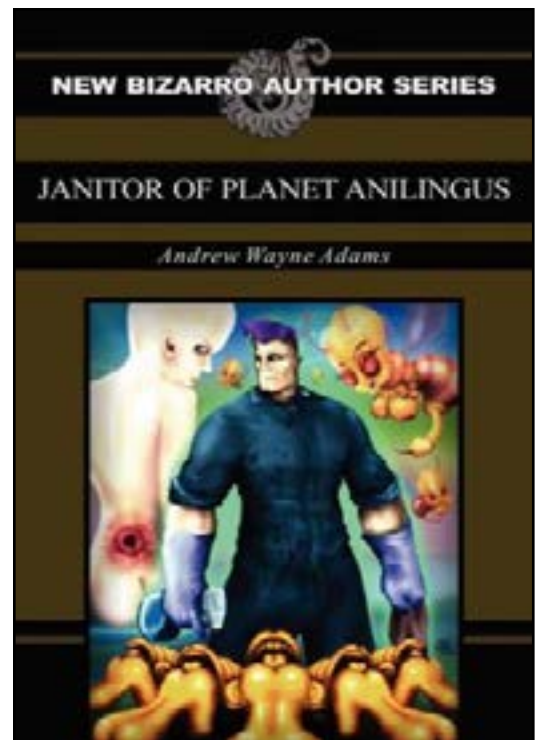




### **Kitten by G. Arthur Brown**

The interesting thing about Gary Arthur Brown's foray in the New Bizarro Authors Series is that it is set in a world with absolutely no recognizable tropes of the fiction world, but it echoes the familiar in the stranger corners of everyday life. Take Trevor's father, who buys endless airtime on cable access tv to broadcast his love for his estranged son, showing off various knick knacks and framed photos of the boy. Cable access in a Bizarro novel.

Then there's the mother, Amaand, a compulsive pill popper who one day consumes pills that have long since expired. She keeps dead children locked in the trunk of her car with a Spectral Gate, which is like a bug zapper only for dead kids. And it's to protect them. Yeaaaah, I forgot how all that echoes real life. That's what Kitten does to you. It oozes with cognitive dissonance. You think you've read something like it before, but you haven't!

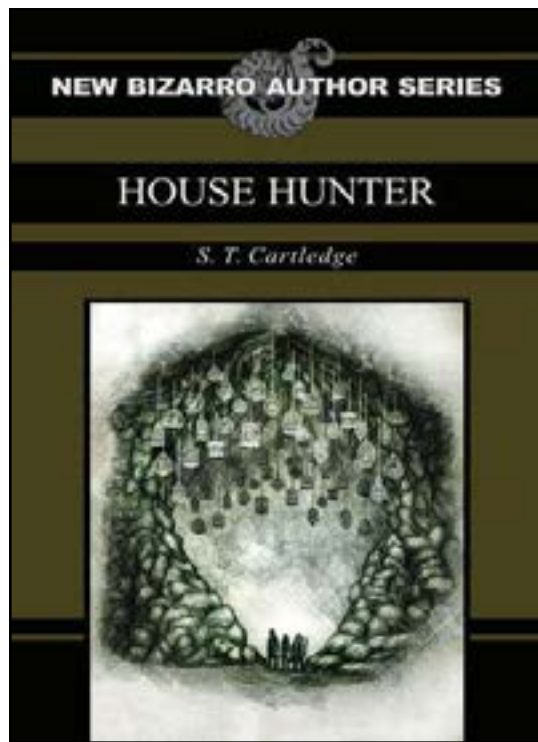


### **Janitor of Planet Anilingus by Andrew Wayne Adams**

Jack is a janitor. Jack is responsible for the custodianship of an entire planet. Said planet is ruled by Catholics, who have suddenly stopped communicating with Jack. Then he meets Nimue, who is on the run from her psychotic ex boyfriend who has already killed her eight times and hopes to do so again.

Andrew Wayne Adams, as I see it, has been the most enterprising in his quest to attain job security with Eraserhead Press. One particular stunt involved him offering to clean someone's house for them (like a janitor) if they bought the book. Best of all, he did it. That kind of dedication is rarely seen these days. But back to the book.

Janitor of Planet Anilingus is the grossest of the lot from the NBAS this year. There is no end of butt licking, bee stinging, pig transformation, plenty of things to confess to your Catholic overlords (at least in the book's setting) when you're finished reading!



### **House Hunter by S.T. Cartledge**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OawX1agsVqk>

Sentient houses are not a new concept to the Bizarro genre. It was tackled first by Kevin Donihe in his Wonderland Book Award winner, *House of Houses*, then explored again in a brief flash fiction from Bradley Sands' *Sorry I Ruined Your Orgy*. Despite this, Shane Cartledge manages to infuse the idea with new feet, literally. Whereas the houses in *House of Houses* are like people, the houses run rampant like wild animals in *House Hunter*.

Enter Imogen the house hunter. She uses her trusty spider legged house named Sonica to, well... hunt houses. The particular house of interest for Imogen for much of the book is the Jabberhouse, the key to the cryptic Association's plans to harvest and cultivate domesticated houses.

Much like Romero's *Her Fingers* I mentioned earlier, *House Hunter* is another richly steeped in the tradition of fantasy, though traditional is not a word I'd use to describe the adventures of Imogen, Ellis and Sonica. I would call *House Hunter* epic. Shane

Cartledge took a symbol that registers within the mind of every single human being on our planet, that symbol being a home, and he transformed it to mean something else. What do we do when our homes are no longer our homes, but living beings searching for their own place in this strange and overwhelming life? What does this say about the main character of Imogen that she has devoted her life to pursuing these untamable architectures? Does she have no need of a home herself? Well, we never really learn all we want to about Imogen, but we don't need to, because it's not her story. It's a story about adventure, that thing that most of us never really get to experience, because we stay home. Reflect on that while reading this book. I did.

In closing, I would urge those wanting to involve themselves in the Bizarro world to take a chance on these six authors as they find their footing and try to build careers for themselves in these very challenging times we live in. Even if you don't like all of them, there's no way you won't at least enjoy some of them.



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# 666 Baby Jesuses, Give or Take

By Scott Cole

## BIO:

Scott Cole has written numerous words, which have appeared in places like Bizarro Central, Weirdear, Flashes In The Dark, and MicroHorror, not to mention countless emails. He also makes pictures, which have been featured in magazines and on people's walls. He lives in Philadelphia, where he likes to listen to strange music and drink coffee.

The thing about Baby Jesuses is, they're everywhere. In a way, I suppose that's kind of the idea, but what I mean is, they're not all in one spot. They're not clustered together like a bunch of grapes, or a group of inmates in a prison. They're more like Easter eggs, all spread out and tucked away in hidden places. Which, again, is probably how it's supposed to be. But my point is, this makes collecting them rather difficult.

I found my first Baby Jesus under the couch, enrobed in a fine coat of dust. It was purple, with slightly darker-purple polka dots, and I nearly tossed it in the trash, before I realized what I had. I brushed the dust off, and he giggled, ticklish. Then he coughed up a tiny knot of phlegm, which was just about the cutest thing I had ever seen. And that's when this little addiction of mine began.

I found the next one baked into a loaf of artisanal bread, which I picked up from the bakery down the road. The bread was a rosemary-olive focaccia. The Baby Jesus was lemon-flavored, with poppy seeds.

The third Baby Jesus had leopard spots. The fourth was decorated with the Italian flag and a tiny mustache. The fifth had raisins. The sixth was covered with old sailor tattoos. The seventh had cat ears, whiskers, and a long tail that waved lazily from side to side. The eighth smelled like cinnamon.

Soon I was finding a new Baby Jesus almost everywhere I went, whether I was looking or not. There was one in a hanging folder in my filing cabinet at work. Another was clogging one of the gutters at my home. I nearly stabbed the one hiding in my Pad Thai with a chopstick.

Before long, I had collected a hundred of these little guys, each one unique in its own special way, each one tucked away in some strange corner of my day-to-day life. Some were alive, and behaved themselves, like cute, cuddly, smiling cherubs. Others were like tiny statues, leaving me to wonder if they were the preserved corpses of dead Baby Jesuses, or just fabrications in the image of the original Baby Jesus. If there was, in fact, an original. If there was, I wonder what it looked like - what color, what flavor, what scent.

Some of my first hundred smelled like vinyl and paint, while others reeked like garbage. Most were fine, though, and smelled soft and fresh and clean, just like any other baby.

They're mostly the same size, these Baby Jesuses, like little teacup kittens. I can hold pretty much any one of them in a single hand if I'm careful about it. And I have been. I haven't dropped one yet.

A few are larger, though. Like the one I found when I cracked open an egg for breakfast one morning. That one seemed to grow slowly, like a sponge in water, until it was the size of a small suitcase. A small, moist suitcase. That one stays in the sink.

I found a bunch of tiny Baby Jesuses on the tops of my ceiling fan blades. These guys are pretty small, actually -- like little Lego men. They'd fit nicely into a dollhouse if I had one, but since I don't, I was thinking about building something. Probably with Legos.

I decided to use some of them as accessories. Most days I've got one of these guys pinned to my lapel, but of course I have to change it out every day -- to go with whatever I'm wearing, but also to keep things fair. I don't want any of them getting jealous.

Once I hit two hundred Baby Jesuses, I knew I really had something. A real collection. Something that took work. Something to be admired.

I bought pedestals and display cases for some of my favorites, playpens and baskets for others. Most of them now live on the shelves of my bookcases, though. I had a yard sale to make the space, and whatever didn't sell went straight to a used bookstore downtown.

I found my two hundred and fiftieth Baby Jesus on the side of the road, lying motionless, dressed as a hobo clown, tire treads all down his left side. Poor thing.

Number 251 was carved out of wood. He's stained beautifully too, but has a pair of plastic googly eyes stuck on, which I think is a little tacky.

Number 264 was a mini, found in a box of chocolate-covered peanuts I bought at the movies. I cleaned him up in the movie theater bathroom while a worker mopped something off the floor of one of the stalls.

Number 312 has a long neck, like a giraffe. No spots, though.

Once I had four hundred Baby Jesuses, I started going to church on Sundays. I had never been a particularly religious man, but four hundred Baby Jesuses have a way of changing a person's mind about things.

At the coffee hour after the service, I asked around, but no one else had a Baby Jesus collection, which I found surprising. Nobody I talked to had even a single one. Most people said they hadn't even been looking.

I'd found the majority of mine without looking, though, so it all seemed a little suspect to me. Were these other people hiding their collections away? Was I taking part in some competition I didn't know about, where everyone was keeping their Baby Jesus number a secret, so as not to let anyone else know their standing in the game? That might be.

Or was I just special? Could I really be the only one in town with a Baby Jesus collection?

The next day I decided to kick my collecting into overdrive. I called in sick to work, and started hunting.

I checked every corner of my house that I hadn't checked before. I found one stuck to the inside of a lampshade, and another in a box of cereal. There was even one hiding inside the sleeve of my original In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida album. I can't find the record, though. I'm starting to think maybe he ate it.

I found a few more out in the yard. There was one dressed like a ninja hiding in the bushes, and another with a red bandana around his neck, balanced on top of the fence.

My next door neighbor wasn't home, so I decided to check his house. I knew his back door had been giving him problems lately. It wasn't tough to jiggle it open. Good thing he didn't have an alarm.

Anyway...Jackpot. My neighbor had a pretty impressive collection himself, but probably never realized it. They were everywhere -- under chairs, in closets, floating in the toilet tank -- and they were some of the most unusual ones I've found.

One of them was covered with dozens of eyeballs, which all seemed to leak little bloody tears. Another was wrapped with gold foil and smelled of chocolate. One seemed to be made of compressed dryer lint. Yet another was, I assume, made of soap. It seemed to foam up whenever I touched it, tiny bubbles effervescing all over its surface.

Once I had gone through the entire house, I gathered all my new Baby Jesuses up in a laundry basket and took them back over to my own house.

The next logical step, of course, was to visit the homes of my church congregation. I fixed a quick snack, then went back out on the hunt.

Sure enough, each of my fellow church-goers had plenty of Baby Jesuses hiding in and around their homes, though I still don't know if they knew it or not. They could just as easily been unaware as they could have been trying to hide their collections from everyone else. Tough to say.

In any event, I'm happy to report that none of these people were home, and that breaking into their houses was extremely easy.

I got a Baby Jesus with a Viking horn helmet, and one dressed like a cheerleader with fluffy pom-poms instead of hands. I got one that looked like a little Bonsai tree. There was one that glowed in the dark, and another that was brown and furry, and had four arms and four legs, and basically looked like a Baby Jesus spider.

One had a hook on its back, like a Christmas tree ornament. Another seemed to be made of peanuts and caramel. And still another one had camera lenses for eyes and a red button on its side.

The last house on my list belonged to an old lady named Gladys. She was actually home, but that turned out to be a good thing, as I found a little red Baby Jesus inside her chest, tucked behind the ribcage, nestled against her heart. And there was another one inside her dog, but I'm not sure I want to get into what I had to do to retrieve it.

I took everything home in a shopping cart I found on the side of the road. Once I got back, I did a quick count and realized I had about 665 Baby Jesuses now. At least, I think so. I got a little mixed up in the middle of the count, and didn't feel like starting over.

Anyway, with 665, I figured one more should do it, since 6 was my lucky number.

I took a break. Sitting down at the kitchen table with some coffee, I remembered reading something years ago about how Jesus probably didn't look like the blonde-haired, blue-eyed image we're all so used to seeing. Given the part of the world he was supposedly born in, he probably had dark skin.

I took a gulp of coffee, and nearly choked. I recovered quickly enough, though, and spit a little Baby Jesus back into the mug. He was dark brown, almost black, and looked like an oversized coffee bean with little arms and legs. He even had that coffee bean split running down his back. Super cute.

So of course I took this to mean that my collection was pretty much complete. It was an obvious sign. I had 666 Baby Jesuses, give or take, and that was good enough for me.

I pulled my best suit out of the closet -- the one I'd been wearing to church all these Sundays -- and got the safety pins out.

Luckily it was a good, solid suit, made of quality

material. I had inherited it from my grandfather, but never wanted to wear it until recently. And now, it was about to become the greatest, most important suit in the history of ever.

I pinned my entire Baby Jesus collection to it. Every single one of them. It wasn't easy, mind you, but I made it work. I put the mini ones on the vest, so they wouldn't bulk things out too much. I needed to be able to fit the jacket on over it. The bigger ones went on the back of the jacket, which had the most real estate.

When I was done, the suit was a thing of beauty. It took some time to put it all on, but once I was wearing it, a sense of accomplishment washed over me. It's actually a little tough to describe how I felt, wearing that suit. There was something special about it. All I can really say is, it was the greatest feeling I had ever experienced. And it was the most comfortable suit I had ever worn, even though I couldn't put my arms down to my sides.

I left my keys and wallet on the kitchen table, as I wouldn't be needing them any more, and I stepped out the front door of my house, not even bothering to pull it shut behind me. From the porch, I looked up to the clouds, squinted at the sun, and pulled in a deep breath.

I exhaled, and everything felt perfect. I was ready to face whatever, or whoever, might be waiting for me along my path. Not that it mattered. I had my suit on.

Then I started moving, one Baby Jesus-cloaked step after another. I walked to the church, knowing that I had more Baby Jesuses than anyone else -- and a suit to pin them on -- ready to step through those doors and declare myself the winner.





# Self-Reliant Robin: A Cautionary Tale? by S.D. Foster

“Self-Reliant” Robin Self, the blind entrepreneur, is the only moneyed man in this otherwise bankrupt town and the father of its most mangled citizen, Miss Robyn Self. Miss Self’s manglement is, you might not know, a recent phenomenon. Once she wasn’t like this. But that was a few months ago, before her disastrous disassembly and controversial reassembly, which came about like so:

\*\*\*

Growing up as an eyeless orphan in this uncharitable locale, “Self-Reliant” Robin learnt from a young age to rely solely on himself. While others all around him, even those equipped with eyeballs, lived in bowel-immobilizing dread of bankruptcy and its consequences, Robin shitted bricks; bricks which he fudged together to self-construct his very own big brown house. This crude construction he shared, for a few short years, with his wife, Robyn, who he’d wooed without the aid of overpriced pheromone sprays, which, back then, were well beyond his means. When Robyn sickened, shortly after baby Robyn’s home delivery, Robin made the diagnosis. And even though his wife did eventually succumb to her sickness, Robin knew that without his life-extending treatments—the watermelon-sized suppositories, the pig piss transfusions—she would have died much sooner.

Providing for his daughter, Robyn, as a single father in a jobless market wasn’t easy at first, but Robin managed. In fact, in the end, he more than managed. He amassed a small fortune, by regional standards, with the sweat of his brow. Quite literally. With a privately developed and top secret process, whereby perspiration was converted to currency.

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But no amassed amount of sweated currency can insure a big brown house of shit against the effects of active enzymes. In The Great Biological Laundry Detergent Flood of 2099—the kind of unnatural disaster this place is blighted by—a supporting wall of the Selfs’ home was partially dissolved. Without adequate support, the ceiling collapsed. Robyn was beneath it.

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Oh happy hour! She wasn’t dead, just exploded by the impact. Here, a head? There, its stem? Close, two hairs? And yon, one hundred thousand more? Whatever these pieces were, Robin was self-assured his daughter wouldn’t remain in her disassembled state for long.

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Afterwards, liberal observers—and they’re a rare specimen here—applauded, as they deem it appropriate to do when evaluating the work, excellent or other, of the disabled. Those less liberal were of the expressed opinion that Robin would have done better employing a fully-sighted professional anatomist, rather than attempt, unaided, the tricky task of daughter-reassembly.

But that wasn’t Robin’s way. He could—would—do it himself. After all, he was blind. And every John Jones knows that the blind, as a substitute for sight, are gifted with a unique sense of the human body. Yes, it was true that, in addition to being a self-reliant man, Robin was a self-controlled man—these two traits go hand in hand—and was therefore not overly familiar with the anatomy of teenage girls, especially not that of his own daughter.

Nevertheless...

In the reassembly stage, there was clearly some confusion between toes and fingers, ear and nose-holes. Even buttocks and breasts. These days, if Robyn’s feeling slutty and wants to show some cleavage, a split in her pants is required. If she needs to shit a brick—it’s a Selfish thing to do—she must first unhitch her bra.

For some contemporary commentators, Robyn’s odd semblance is the conclusion of a cautionary tale. Our townsfolk need to work together to survive these trying times: that’s the moral. Others—for whom Robin is something of an icon—say the fact that Robyn is alive despite her manglement, is, in itself, a triumph for individualism. Still others claim this brief biography is absurd to the point of lacking any meaning whatsoever.



# Next Issue: Lovecraft



December issue is Conspiracy Theories. Also accepting submissions for the next SG anthology entitled, "Vertigo Schisms: Tales of the Surreal and Grotesque". Deadline Dec. 1st. Check website for details: [www.surrealgrotesque.com](http://www.surrealgrotesque.com). Twitter: @RealGrotesque. Facebook: [www.facebook.com/TheSurrealGrotesque](http://www.facebook.com/TheSurrealGrotesque). Submit stories to [SurrealGrotesque77@hotmail.com](mailto:SurrealGrotesque77@hotmail.com)

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